

**BEYOND IDOLATRY: PROPOSING A BLACK APOPHATIC PHENOMENOLOGY IN  
RESPONSE TO ANTHONY PINN'S HUMANIST THEOLOGY**

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by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **BEYOND IDOLATRY: PROPOSING A BLACK APOPHATIC PHENOMENOLOGY IN RESPONSE TO ANTHONY PINN'S HUMANIST THEOLOGY**

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Dr. Anthony Pinn's African-American Non-Theistic Humanist theology seeks to escape the idolatries demonstrated by classical monotheistic Christianity which are the foundational underpinnings of Black Liberation and Womanist theologies. He does this through the total disposal of the idea of God and the complete silencing of God-talk. A key question, however, is whether this is the only, or even best, solution for addressing this issue? This author argues that Pinn's attempt to escape the idolatry of classical monotheistic theologies through his proposed non-theistic humanist theology succumbs to the same type of idolatry that he fights against.

The solution this author proposes to the problem of idolatry found within Pinn's humanist theology is a Black Apophatic Phenomenology. This proposed Black Apophatic Phenomenology is a philosophical, non-propositional, phenomenological apophatism which draws from the phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion, as well as the nontheistic philosophical work of Kyoto School scholar Masao Abe.

Black Apophatic Phenomenology, as a philosophical construct, recognizes the theological and philosophical limitations of Pinn's African American Non-Theistic Humanist theology—its atheistic idolatry and the resulting exclusion of other theistic and non-theistic positions—and its

assessment of God-talk. Black Apophatic Phenomenology is expressly formulated to overcome the problems of onto-theology and idolatry by allowing for a post-metaphysical conception of the potentiality of divinity, and of ultimate reality—theistically and nontheistically respectively—while still allowing the space and flexibility for the type of God-talk Pinn seeks to restrict and omit.

## **DEDICATION**

To Brianne and Michael, who both contributed to this journey by leading me down the path of healing for my mind, body, and spirit.

To my brother, Ronald, without whose love and self-sacrifice, I could not have completed this journey.

To Dr. Monica A. Coleman, who gave me unlimited and unmatched support, advice, mentorship and friendship; there is not enough time in the world to repay you for all you are and all you have done for me.

Most importantly, to my husband and my love, to whom I owe everything.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

The problem I will address in this dissertation is the following: Is Anthony Pinn's African American Non-Theistic Humanist theology (AANHT)—a theology that requires the total disposal of the idea of God and the complete silencing of God-talk—the only solution to escaping the idolatries demonstrated by classical monotheistic Christianity, as well as the foundational theological underpinnings of Black Liberation and Womanist theologies? I vigorously declare that it is not. Furthermore, I assert that Pinn's attempt to escape the idolatry of classical monotheistic theologies through his proposed non-theistic humanist theology succumbs to the same type of idolatry that he fights against.

The solution I propose to the problem of idolatry found within Pinn's humanist theology is a Black Apophatic Phenomenology (BAP). My proposed Black Apophatic Phenomenology is a philosophical non-propositional phenomenological apophatism much like that which has been developed in the phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion, as well as the nontheistic philosophical work of Kyoto School scholar Masao Abe. BAP, as a philosophical construct, recognizes the theological and philosophical limitations of Pinn's AANHT and its assessment of God-talk. Black Apophatic Phenomenology is expressly formulated to overcome the problems of ontology and idolatry by allowing for a post-metaphysical conception of ultimate reality, theistically and nontheistically, while still allowing the space and flexibility for the type of God-talk Pinn seeks to restrict and omit.

### **Idolatry**

Because I assert that both classical Christianity and Pinn's African American Non-Theistic Humanist theology are idolatrous, a very brief discussion of ideology is pertinent.



Traditional understandings of idolatry, especially as the concept pertains to classical Christianity, usually focus on the creation of actual, tangible symbols being used to represent the image and presence of God here on earth. Traditional idols served as visible, tactile, and controllable objects of worship located within finite space and time. However, idolatry is not limited to these types of representations. Bruce Ellis Benson asserts that idols can also be intellectual or conceptual in nature. In fact, he immediately notes that ideologies—the attempt at a coherent set of ideas, insights or consciousness, usually regarding one’s self and the world—can also serve as idols for humanity.<sup>1</sup>

The term ideology can be traced back to the Greek concept of *eidos*, which, in its earliest manifestations, was more precisely associated with encapsulating something’s outward appearance.<sup>2</sup> Plato used *eidos* to reference Forms; Plato’s pupil Aristotle goes further in his philosophy to see form as the primary substance and essence of things. For Aristotle, *eidos* “is the form of a substance that makes it the kind of thing that it is.”<sup>3</sup> Aristotle’s *eidos* represents predication and definition. While this particular understanding of *eidos* originates more so from Aristotle, a subsequent Platonic understanding of *eide* as “the thoughts of God,” was passed down from Plotinus into Christianity.<sup>4</sup> It is not the purpose of this research to exhaustively

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1. Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida and Marion on Modern Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 19-26.

2. Ibid.

3. S. Marc Cohen, "Aristotle's Metaphysics" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016, URL= <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/>>

4. Francis Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), [https://web.archive.org/web/20181025172854/https://books.google.com/books?id=JepR6Mj9Hy8C&pg=PA50&lpg=PA50&dq=eidos+definition+greek&source=bl&ots=JWykYgnGvy&sig=UZvlzVYdViSw514n8nrMpUun3I&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi21snNidjZAhWQ\\_p8KHVJ5Bio4ChDoAQgmMAA#v=onepage&q=eidos%20definition%20greek&f=false](https://web.archive.org/web/20181025172854/https://books.google.com/books?id=JepR6Mj9Hy8C&pg=PA50&lpg=PA50&dq=eidos+definition+greek&source=bl&ots=JWykYgnGvy&sig=UZvlzVYdViSw514n8nrMpUun3I&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi21snNidjZAhWQ_p8KHVJ5Bio4ChDoAQgmMAA#v=onepage&q=eidos%20definition%20greek&f=false)

discuss the concept of *eidos*. However, a brief contemplation of the term is useful to understanding how ideology could potentially be considered idolatrous.

Putting all these concepts together—ideology, *eidos*, and idolatry—yields the following: Our conceptions of the way we perceive things to be can be encapsulated in ideas, and those ideas can be logically and coherently structured into an established ideology. Idolatry occurs when our ideologies—whether we formulate them, or merely internalize them—are seen to encompass the full essence of either what reality is, or what reality should be. When talking specifically about God, idolatry makes God into a mirror image of our own experience of the divine. Even though we may ascribe attributes to God that are much better than our own human characteristics, the different ideologies and theologies we have regarding God—especially as they pertain to classical monotheistic Christianity—allow us to remain in control of how God is defined. God is held captive by our imagination; and within our theological paradigms, God is prohibited from being larger than the confines of our unambiguously coherent theological systems.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to understand that the situation of idolatry is not dependent upon whether or not one is a theist. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche calls philosophers idolaters. Specifically, he asserts that “whenever these venerable concept idolaters revere something, they kill it and stuff it; they suck the life out of everything they worship.”<sup>6</sup> In this passage, he is stipulating that philosophers are afraid to let their ideas and concepts change—grow, age, or even die—and as a result, Nietzsche calls them mummifiers and gravediggers. He even refers to

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5. Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, 22

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16-17. See Aphorisms 1 and 2 under Reason in Philosophy.

philosophers' love of certainty and stasis as that which causes philosophers to operate in their own form of monoton-theism. Per Nietzsche, philosophers put their faith in reason and logic to substantiate their belief that there is permanence, unity, cohesion and ultimate absolute Truth in their dehistoricized, abstracted constructs. He bemoans philosophy's rejection of what he calls "the testimony of the senses."<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche believes that the senses represent what is real and true to the extent that these senses reflect a world of multiplicity and change. The senses reflect the "apparent world;" it is a world of becoming, of passing away, of creation, and of recreation. Philosophers postulate that an unchanging, "true world" must exist; for Nietzsche, there is one and only one world—the apparent, finite, temporal world of the here and now.<sup>8</sup>

### **Situating BAP, Pinn's Humanism, and Phenomenology**

In his African American Non-Theistic Humanist Theology, hereafter referred to as AANHT, Anthony Pinn, proposes an abolishment of the idea of God and the cessation of God-talk as the only solution to escaping the idolatries he believes to be demonstrated by classical monotheism as it pertains to African-Americans. I share many of Pinn's concerns, questions, and issues regarding classical monotheistic theology. Epistemologically, I resonate with the critiques offered by Pinn, as well as the critiques posed by William R. Jones, upon whom Pinn draws. Jones and Pinn pose a significant challenge to classical Christianity by challenging what we think we can know about God. Because some interpretations of monotheism make claims to know almost exactly who God is, challenging the certainty of dearly held propositional beliefs about God can make some people feel that their religious systems are in peril. However, it is

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7. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 16-17.

8. Ibid.

important to realize that Pinn's critiques add substantially to the rich and diverse conversations happening within black and womanist theologies as a whole.

However, while I agree with Pinn in, many areas, I also assert that AANHT is not the only, or even the best, solution. In fact, through AANHT Pinn engages in the same type of idolatrous practice he seeks to avoid. I propose a Black Apophatic Phenomenology, hereafter referred to as BAP, as a philosophical, non-propositional, phenomenological apophatism that will overcome idolatry without eliminating God-talk. BAP maintains Pinn's departure from classical black and womanist theologies, that still have remnants of classical Western theology as its foundation; but BAP facilitates God-talk and expands the theistic continuum of theological conversation within African American Theology.

Black Apophatic Phenomenology is strongly influenced by the apophatic philosophies of Jean Luc Marion and Masao Abe. Marion's apophatic phenomenology specifically addresses and overcomes the issues of onto-theology in philosophy and idolatry in theology, while still allowing for the possibility of the self-revelation of the divine. Furthermore, Marion's work recognizes the limitations linguistically inherent in the ability of discourse to accurately convey reality or to adequately expound upon the concepts of divinity and transcendence. On the other hand, Abe's philosophical interpretation of Zen allows for the apophatic nontheistic expression of the ineffability of ultimate reality in a way that still allows for dialogue regarding theism without capitulating to the concept of a totally transcendent being. I assert that apophatics facilitates epistemological and linguistic openness by eschewing the perceived certainty demonstrated through logical propositions and metaphysical claims. Apophatism, unlike many other systems, recognizes the necessity of ambiguity through the pathway of unknowing and the activity of growing and becoming.

BAP also has its roots in the evolution of phenomenological studies—especially to the extent that this evolution involves overcoming propositional metaphysical language when talking about God, while simultaneously opening up the possibility for theological language within philosophical structures. This continuing emanation of phenomenology serves as fertile ground for some phenomenologists to entertain ideas of revelation, of God/Divine/transcendence, and religion phenomenologically. Philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, and Jean-Louis Chretien are often labeled, “the new phenomenologists,”<sup>9</sup> and my research builds on their phenomenological DNA. However, as J. Aaron Simmons and Bruce Ellis Benson note, “the work of the new phenomenologists is characterized as much by differences between the different thinkers as it is by their commonalities.”<sup>10</sup> As utterly frustrating as this heterogeneity can appear, it is precisely the differences in how to both “do” phenomenology and ascertain the “boundaries” of phenomenology that makes the phenomenological exercise similar to the complexity and ambiguity of the phenomena being investigated.

### **Situating BAP within My Personal Experience**

I am deeply invested in the BAP proposal because I have personal experience with the idolatry of classical Christianity. I was raised a fundamentalist Christian who sincerely, actively and consistently participated in the Black Church of my youth and young adult years. I had an anthropomorphic understanding of God; I was taught, and I believed, that God was the ultimate example of goodness, love, and justice in the world. However, given the reality of horrific

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9. Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 3.

10. J. Aaron Simmons and Bruce Ellis Benson, *The New Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 80, Kindle.

suffering for some of the poorest and most disadvantaged peoples of the world—many of whom seem relatively innocent in juxtaposition with the enormity of their suffering—I began to question my understanding of God. How could God be good, loving, and just, while simultaneously allowing these unthinkable tragedies to exist? I found my anthropomorphic ideology to be in conflict with the realities of the world. Not only that, but I found that the realities of the world subsequently effected my definitions of what is good, loving, and just. My inability to align the characteristics of God I had been taught through the classical monotheistic theology practiced in my local Black church with the concepts I had defined intuitively in my mind and heart pushed me to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty in my experience of the Divine.

Not only did I find classical Christian theology's ideology regarding the characteristics of God to be in conflict with the realities of my world, but I also observed that classical Christian theology's ideology was used as a vehicle to privilege the beliefs, proclivities, and socio-economic power dynamics of the human beings claiming to serve said anthropomorphic God. I experienced numerous examples of this as a Black woman throughout my seminary training in predominantly white, theologically conservative/evangelical institutions. I witnessed and experienced the same type of privileging in conservative evangelical Black church settings where my gender limited me from participating fully in a ministerial capacity. I felt that God—characterized as male, if not both white and male—put me, a Black cis-gendered female, at an insurmountable disadvantage.

After my traditional Judeo-Christian paradigm was shattered as a result of my own crisis of faith, I wondered if I should—or if I even could—still be a person of faith. I still struggle with the same question to this day. Yet, at the same time, I wonder what type of person I would be

without my faith. I have had my own personal spiritual experiences. These personal spiritual experiences have often been intertwined—whether positively or negatively—with identity forming aspects of my life. Most of my relationships with other people prior to my crisis of faith had been informed by my fundamentalist understanding of God. After my crisis of faith, my burgeoning identity as well as my relational development are now being informed and infused with the questions that I cannot help but ask regarding God, religion, theology and human existence. Yet and still, I was, and I am, a person forged by faith. On occasion, I lean towards humanism and find it to be existentially cold and dark to me; at other times, I find it to be what helps me to be the most intellectually honest and experientially authentic. On some days, I see how my Christian foundation is helpful to me; other days I embrace my deep need to have the truths from other faith traditions heal me in the places that Christianity has left me hurting and fearful. I need God-talk; and from the various conversations I have had with others, and the numerous thoughts, feelings, and questions they have shared with me, I know that I am not alone.

### **Dissertation Chapter Overview**

In the following chapters, I will be walking through the problem being presented in this dissertation, then I will present my solution to the problem. In Chapter Two, I discuss the problem of Pinn's idolatry as demonstrated through his African American Nontheistic Humanist Theology. Within his proposed theology, he displays a truncated view on theism as a whole by developing a humanistic theology designed to eliminate his own idolatrous understanding of a classical, monotheistic Christian God. Not only that, but he further silences even the slightest acknowledgment of this God—and thus, in so doing, he silences acknowledgment of all god or gods—in his admonition to end God-talk. Also in Chapter Two, I discuss the influence of

William R. Jones on the development of Pinn's critiques of classical monotheism. I then mark Pinn's development of ideas from his embryonic seeds regarding embodiment, to the initiation of his AANHT in his book, *The End of God-Talk*. I share concluding thoughts regarding the chapter, and then move on to the solution I propose to Pinn's idolatry in Chapter Three.

In Chapter Three, I introduce the first component for my Black Apophatic Phenomenology based on the theistic apophatic phenomenology of Jean Luc-Marion. I focus on explaining aspects of Marion's phenomenology that apply to overcoming idolatry. I begin the chapter with an explanation of the philosophical and theological problem of onto-theology. Seeing no way for onto-theology to be overcome ontologically, whether it be within the constructs of ontic being or within the understanding of the Heideggerian Being of beings, Marion, as a result, turns to phenomenology. I will use some of the more prominent phenomenological terminology—concepts including intuition, intention, aim, adequation, givenness, saturation, etc.—to discuss Marion's understanding of the idol and the icon. In Marion's attempts to avoid the idolatrous, he envisions the idea of saturated phenomena which provide the possibility of divine self-revelation; I discuss Marion's understanding of such a saturation and its revelatory possibilities. The penultimate portion of Chapter Three discusses the methodology of de-nomination Marion uses to point toward and address, without predication and in a non-propositional manner, the revelatory givenness of the Ineffable divine that Marion postulates as the saturation of the saturation—the Saturation par Excellence. I end the chapter with concluding thoughts concerning this apophatic solution to Pinn's idolatry.

In Chapter Four I introduce the second, nontheistic component for my Black Apophatic Phenomenology based on the non-theistic apophasis of Masao Abe and his philosophical



interpretation of Zen Buddhism. Abe applies a similar methodology in his process of overcoming duality, maintaining ineffability, and transcending substantiality as Marion's process of de-nomination. Marion and Abe both apply the steps of affirmation, negation, and the negation of the negation—steps that I refer to as Abe's methodology of double negation. Abe's application of double negation in his interpretation of Zen eliminates ontological difference from his philosophical paradigm; furthermore, Abe's Zen as a whole surpasses ontological constructs such as being in opposition to nonbeing. In Chapter Four, I introduce Abe's understanding of the term *sunyata*—also referred to as emptiness and nothingness—which, for Abe, reflects the surpassing of every duality, including being and non-being. *Sunyata* is a crucial Buddhist term for most of the scholars of the Kyoto School; as such, it should come as no surprise that there are other possible interpretations for *sunyata*. Chapter Four explores an alternate, ontologically based interpretation of absolute nothingness proposed by fellow Kyoto School scholar Keiji Nishitani. Not only do I discuss how Nishitani's interpretation of *sunyata* differs from Abe's interpretation, but I also discuss why I have chosen Abe's understanding of *sunyata* and his methodology of double negation as nontheistic apophatic components of BAP. Ultimately, Abe's work is important to my argument because, as I discuss in Chapter Four, his methodology of double negation overcomes onto-theology, ontology, and dualities that lead to nontheistic, ideological idolatries. As the nontheistic component of BAP, the methodology demonstrates that there are means other than the adoption of an African American Non-Theistic Humanist Theology to address idolatry, without ceasing God-talk.

In the final chapter, I discuss Pinn's critique of dogmatically kataphatic classical Christianity and I define and summarize the problem of idolatry in Pinn's equally dogmatically kataphatic AANHT. After assessing Pinn's critiques and addressing Pinn's idolatry, I introduce

my proposed Black Apophatic Phenomenology as a non-dogmatic apophasis meant to foster inclusion within the African American community, facilitate dialogue amongst the diversity of African Americans, and encourage increased knowledge and understanding of the variety of African American experiences. I discuss that BAP has an apophatic theistic component, based on Marion's apophasis, and a nontheistic component, based on Abe's methodology of double negation. Furthermore, I discuss BAP, Pinn's AANHT and race, reflecting the influence of Dr. Victor Andersen's pragmatic theology—what he refers to as Creative Exchange—upon my understanding of race in BAP.

I conclude the dissertation with thoughts of BAP as a flexible phenomenological philosophical paradigm that can employ various philosophies to query theistic and nontheistic theologies and philosophies in an open, apophatic, and nondogmatic manner. I posit BAP as placing diversity, inclusivity, conversation and interrogation at its center. In so doing, BAP displaces the centrality of any one mode of liberative action and, instead, further reflects the multitudinous contributions to complex subjectivity and meaning making pertaining to the widely diverse African American community. Finally, I provide some examples of how BAP will utilize, query, and analyze established cultural and societal rituals.

## **CHAPTER TWO: AFRICAN AMERICAN NON-THEISTIC HUMANIST THEOLOGY (AANHT)**

Anthony B. Pinn develops African American Non-Theistic Humanist Theology (AANHT) as a vehicle both for seeking human meaning apart from his idea of God as well as for supplanting God-talk within the landscape of African American theology. Pinn is diametrically opposed to the concept of a transcendent, metaphysical God, as well as the God-talk arising from acknowledging such a god's existence. Pinn opposes both the God of Black and Womanist theology and the God of black evangelical Christianity, given that Pinn understands these theologies in various ways to accept that God sustains African Americans in the midst of suffering and oppression.<sup>11</sup> Pinn asserts that the God of Evangelical African-American Christianity, Black Liberation, and Womanist theologies—as Pinn perceives God for each respective theology—is irrelevant to black people in terms of their individual suffering and the systemic, structural oppression blacks experience in the United States. While the work of James Cone, and the subsequent scholarly research of Womanist scholars, serve as acts of theological structural rebellion against white evangelical and mainline Protestant Christian theologies, Pinn passionately argues that traditional Black and Womanist Liberation theologies themselves remain irreparably flawed. The flaw is based on their dependence upon an idea of “God” that is locked in the mire of the limitations of metaphysics. Pinn asserts that, according to their own tenets, the God of Black and Womanist theologies cannot be spoken of outside of God's participation in the liberation of the oppressed. If God is participating with the oppressed in the struggle for liberation, a theistic-humanist partnership of sorts is involved. Pinn labels this

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11. Discussing whether or not Pinn's assessments of these other theologies is accurate is outside the scope of this current research.

Christian or theistic humanism that is utilized by Black Liberation and Womanist theologies to be a “weak humanism.” In using the term weak humanism, he means a religious humanism that seeks “to conceptualize the assumed workings of God through human muscle and mission within the arena of human life, whereby flesh becomes a particular encasing for God.”<sup>12</sup>

Pinn believes that the problem with this theistically tinged humanism is that “within this theistic humanist perspective, social transformation becomes the litmus test for the relevance of God.” By this, Pinn means that “the existential [liberative] experience of African Americans is the hermeneutic through which truth claims are assessed.”<sup>13</sup> As a result of having liberation and social transformation be the hermeneutic through which truth claims are assessed, God and God-talk are still metaphysically propositional. God, by definition and default, is the God that is on the side of the oppressed and fighting for liberation alongside them. Pinn astutely notes that the mere idea of theological truth claims regarding God as liberator is rife with subsequent issues of theodicy, issues of liberation in this life versus liberation in the afterlife, questions regarding what liberation actually means, and inquiries as to whether liberation is even possible.

Pinn’s recognition of the problems stemming from truth claims regarding God as liberator is not dissimilar from the theological and philosophical concerns involving onto-theology. Western philosophers and classical theologians alike seek to establish universal absolutes and certainties in their respective ideological structures through the use of truth claims about the ultimacy of God—whether through God as Ultimate Source or God as Highest Being. In much

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12. Anthony Pinn, *The End of God -Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 139-40.

13. Ibid., 146.

the same way, Pinn's criticisms reveal how God as liberator also falls short when put to the propositional test of what definitely characterizes God.

After determining what he deems to be flaws in the theological framework of Black and Womanist theologies, Pinn develops an African American Nontheistic Humanist Theology designed to eliminate his perceived concept of God. To understand Pinn's constructive AANHT, one must start with Pinn's thoughts regarding the inadequacies of Black Liberation Theology, Womanist Theology, and other classical, monotheistically based theologies. In Pinn's earlier writings such as *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, Pinn's primary focus is on the tremendous problem he sees regarding the "centrality of suffering (therefore 'theodicy') to the Black theological enterprise."<sup>14</sup> Pinn asserts that the assessment that suffering is redemptive, and therefore has some theological value, is the most prominent dysfunction regarding the place of suffering in theology. Pinn blames the classical monotheistic concept of God for beliefs that the suffering of the oppressed is beneficial in any way. To the contrary, however, Pinn vehemently asserts that the idea of redemptive suffering and the notion of liberation are two diametrically opposed ideas; redemptive suffering and liberation are so completely irreconcilable that the idea of redemptive suffering tangibly undermines socially transformative activities.<sup>15</sup> To bolster his hypothesis, Pinn heavily draws upon the work of William R. Jones, author of *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology*. As a result, the next section of this chapter begins with an exploration of aspects of Jones' scholarship that influence relevant subject matter in Pinn's subsequent works.

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14. Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 17.

15. Ibid.

## Jones' Scholarship as Foundation for Pinn's AANHT

### *Black Suffering*

William R. Jones argues in his influential book, *Is God A White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (hereafter referred to as IGWR), that liberation theology has an unquestioned and unwavering assumption of God's omnibenevolence. Jones argues that liberation theology has an unquestioned and unwavering assumption of God's omnibenevolence.<sup>16</sup> Jones communicates his diagnosis of liberation theology's pervasive bias under the umbrella of his paradigm of theodicy—the problem of evil and human suffering.<sup>17</sup> Jones locates ideas about human suffering under the rubric of his theodicy. Under this rubric, Jones asks if human suffering is positive, negative, or neutral? Another way of stating this question regarding suffering is to ask whether humanity must, by definition, endure existential suffering as an inescapable quality of the human condition, or if humanity draws the opposite conclusion. The opposite conclusion would be, according to Jones, the determination that suffering can be eliminated, thus resulting in humanity's need to annihilate suffering.<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, Jones asserts that “the theologian of liberation, by definition, is committed to [annihilating] oppression, which is to say, [they are committed to eliminating] the suffering that is the heart of oppression.”<sup>19</sup> However, it is exactly this definition—this stated presumption of Liberation Theology and the liberation theologian's purpose for being—that is the problem with Liberation Theology and its theologians. Black Liberation and Womanist theologies purport to involve a God who identifies with the oppression of black people and works in conjunction with

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16. William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), x.

17. Ibid., xx.

18. Ibid., xxiv.

19. Ibid., xxv.

them for liberation from their oppression. Yet black suffering has continued almost five hundred years, morphing from brutal and deadly legalized slavery to the more recent evolution of the insidious prison industrial complex. What does it say about a God who, despite being believed to identify with a people and their sufferings and who is thought to work with them for their liberation, cannot produce liberation for those same people?

Jones concludes that the reality of “unrelieved black suffering” is explicable only if 1) there is no God, 2) if God exists but is not active in temporal, human affairs, or 3) if the elimination of black suffering is either unimportant to or unwanted by God.<sup>20</sup> Jones buttresses these possible propositions regarding God by asserting that black suffering is specifically ethnic in both its existence and essence, and multievidential in its meaning. With the assertion that suffering is multievidential, Jones means that, when querying and assessing the meaning of a Judeo-Christian Evangelical interpretation of suffering, one must admit that it could represent God’s punishment for rebellion and disobedience. On the other hand, suffering could represent the hand of God upon God’s chosen servant to share in Christ’s suffering and receive a greater reward in heaven.<sup>21</sup> Contrary to the first two options, however, is the further possibility that suffering has no divine meaning at all. Suffering might just happen apart from a God of any kind because life is random, evolving, fighting for survival and brutally imperfect. Who really knows the answer?

Regarding the specifically ethnic nature of black suffering, Jones builds an argument that the suffering of black people lends itself to the charge of divine racism. Jones hypothesizes that four features—maldistribution, negative quality, enormity, and non-catastrophic character—

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20. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 29.

21. *Ibid.*, 15-17.

constitute ethnic suffering. Jones postulates that “black suffering is balanced by white non-suffering instead of white suffering,” thus begging the question as to what reasoning is behind how suffering afflicts some people and not others.<sup>22</sup> He goes further to stipulate that black suffering is definitively negative in that it leads away from what might be considered to be the highest good of black people, serving neither the well-being of black people nor even their salvation. For Jones, black suffering has been enormous in terms of statistical measurements, to the extent at which the moniker of genocide can reasonably be assigned. The enormity of black suffering not only refers to the numbers of people of a particular ethnicity that have been affected, but it also refers to the gravity of the suffering in terms of loss of black lives. Acknowledging this aspect of the enormity of black suffering leads Jones to rule out otherwise plausible divine reasons for allowing such suffering. In other words, one could attempt to refute the charge of divine racism if one could argue that suffering results in lessons learned and the occurrence of individual existential growth. However, individual lessons learned at the expense of the learner’s life make much less sense as a justifiable reason for suffering.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Jones asserts that black suffering is non-catastrophic; by this, he means that the suffering has been transgenerational, reverberating throughout long periods of history, and traversing the mental and physical well-being of countless black bloodlines.<sup>24</sup>

By asserting that the charge of divine racism is strengthened by understanding black suffering to be ethnic and multievidential, Jones is not specifically concluding that the Judeo-Christian God is indeed a white racist. Instead, Jones is masterfully arguing that male and female black theologians should drop the assumption of an omnibenevolent deity as the cornerstone of

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22. Ibid., 21.

23. Ibid., 21-22.

24. Ibid.



black liberation theology when there are valid and substantial reasons to question whether that same deity is fundamentally and ontologically opposed to their theological focus. Of course, Jones is addressing the age old, and existentially insoluble, problem of evil. In this case, Jones uses the specific terminology of God being a “white racist” when applying the problem of evil to black suffering. Using this terminology makes Jones’s arguments very difficult to ignore. As mentioned previously, it is Liberation Theology’s dependence on God as liberator that causes Jones to wonder if God is a white racist. Jones explicitly states, “theodicy and divine racism are controlling issues because black oppression and suffering are made the starting point for theological analysis.” As an example, Jones refers to Cone’s assertion that the task of black theology is to destroy Gods who are not for black liberation.<sup>25</sup> However, once declared, Jones observes that Cone is painted into a corner and ultimately tasked to demonstrate that the accepted God of Black Liberation Theology is indeed a liberator.

Jones’ scholarship regarding theodicy, black suffering, and God’s assumed omnibenevolence is important to Anthony Pinn’s work regarding the end of God talk because of Jones’ assertion—and Pinn’s agreement—that “whatever impedes the characterization of ... suffering as negative constitutes an essential prop for oppression.” Jones further stipulates “If a theological or philosophical concept serves to make suffering neutral or, even worse, an essential ingredient of one’s salvation, it provides ... substantial support for the world view of oppression.”<sup>26</sup> For Jones, “the aim of theodicy in Christian thought has been to exonerate God’s purpose and governance” often in regards to pervasive, sadistic, unconscionable and unjustifiable suffering. Exonerating God in terms of God’s responsibility for suffering ultimately results in

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25. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 72-73.

26. *Ibid.*, 43.

robbing such suffering of “its pernicious flavor.”<sup>27</sup> Instead of acting in line with the various Christian theodicies—in other words, instead of acting in line with institutions and socio-political, economic structures that perpetuate these theodicies—Jones advocates jettisoning “the beliefs and concepts that give oppression its moral and conceptual justification.” He further elaborates that the oppressed must rebel in order to move toward “a realignment of power.” They must know that their suffering, rather than serving some higher purpose, is instead merely dehumanizing.<sup>28</sup> However, if one believes that some responses to suffering are not only inappropriate, but more detrimental to the situation than those persons and contextual circumstances bringing about the suffering, then the level of resistance needed to significantly reduce the suffering may be unduly tempered.

As previously noted, Jones’ work significantly influenced Pinn, especially as it pertained to Pinn’s conviction that theism was no longer acceptable for black theology. Thus, it is crucial to explore the aspect of Jones’ work that discusses the expansion of the concept of theology to one that is more humanistic. Jones’s ultimate desire is to “attempt to make a place in the theological circle for a non-theistic model”<sup>29</sup> Jones himself was an adherent to a totally secular model of reality, although he decided not to elaborate on it in IGWR.<sup>30</sup> Pinn takes this idea as his starting point in his African American Humanist Theology. Both Pinn’s interest in the expansion of the theological circle, as well as my own subsequent interest in expanding the theological continuum, leads to the need for a brief look at Jones’s foundational work in this area as it applies to the expansion of the theistic-nontheistic continuum for Black Theology.

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27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 171.

30. Ibid., 186.

### *Expansion of the Theological Model*

In his beginning arguments for the expansion of the theological model, Jones asserts that “black religion is fundamentally theistic,” and that “a movement away from theism should come only if it is convincingly demonstrated that it is a hindrance to black liberation.”<sup>31</sup> Although Jones is clearly not in favor of the God espoused by Cone’s Black Liberation Theology, Jones still calls for openness as it pertains to God-talk. The pragmatism of his comments given the religiosity of African-Americans at the time of his writing notwithstanding, he still chooses to approach his public arguments regarding Black Theology with openness towards a theistic outlook. Jones’s openness, however, did not dissuade him from his conclusion that Black Theology, as constructed at that time, was not compatible with a theology of liberation. That having been said, Jones notes that James Cone’s Black Liberation Theology forcefully and solidly advocates for the liberation of black people over the oppressor. Jones notes that, for Cone, God chooses black people for liberation and identifies with these oppressed peoples to the point that God takes their liberation on as his own. For Cone, blacks are not chosen to be the suffering servants suffering at the hands of the white oppressor.<sup>32</sup> Quite to the contrary, per Jones, Cone’s theology purports that God cannot simultaneously have love for both the oppressor and the oppressed. In fact, Jones asserts that, for Cone, God’s election of the oppressed simultaneously prioritizes liberation and condemns white oppressors to the destructive power of

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31. Ibid., 172. It is important to note that labels such as Black Liberation Theology and Womanist theologies are generalized, reductionistic terminology regarding very narrowly defined theological constructs referring to theological systems arising during a certain time and place in African American history. In no way are all African American theologies, be they theistic or humanistic, under the same theistic assumptions as those argued against by Jones. Because no African American theology is monolithic, it is important to note that Jones’ arguments and critiques are made toward theistic belief systems reflected in James Cone’s understanding of Black Liberation Theology and the first and second waves of Womanist Theology, relatively near the historical time and context in which these theologies were first intuited.

32. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 99.

God's wrath.<sup>33</sup> Most importantly, the God of Cone's Black Liberation Theology is sovereign and omnipotent, out of necessity, such that no matter the level of oppression and struggle blacks suffer, they know that "victory over oppression, evil, and death is assured" because the "future is ... the future of God, the liberator of the oppressed."<sup>34</sup>

Jones uses Cone's assertions to question Cone's reasoning as to "how white racism thrives within the larger freedom and sovereignty of God," such that, "if white racism runs rampant while God is allegedly 'in control,' where then is the basis for black hope?"<sup>35</sup> James Cone recognizes the seriousness of this critique; and yet, he unequivocally states that "it is a violation of black faith to weaken either divine love or divine power;" much as the weakening God's love or power is antithetical to what Cone refers to as "all of the classic theologies of the Christian tradition."<sup>36</sup> James Cone later counters that "faith arising out of the cross and resurrection of Jesus" renders Jones's questions about God's sovereignty and black hope "absurd from the biblical point of view." Cone asserts that it is "God becoming the Suffering Servant in Christ" so that black people can be "liberated from injustice and pain" that is the foundation of the biblical faith.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, it is faith in the "experience of the cross and resurrection" that is the proof that black suffering is not only wrong, "but that it has been overcome in Jesus Christ."<sup>38</sup> Key to Cone's arguments is Cone's assertion that, in essence, faith trumps philosophical logic. Cone argues that faith in Jesus provides what suffering people need to survive their actual experiences of white racism and oppression. Faith provides oppressed black

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33. Ibid, 103.

34. Ibid., 107.

35. Ibid.107.

36. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 163.

37. Ibid., 172.

38. Ibid., 192.

people with the freedom to “struggle for the affirmation of black humanity;” Jesus gives black people “courage and strength to ‘hold out to the end.’”<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, Jones assesses that there is a theodicy problem based on what he considers the philosophically inescapable possibility that God could be a white racist. Beyond the ideas of black theology and racism, Jones raises the question as to whether or not God is complicit—explicitly or implicitly—with the reality of evil in the world. The very real and extremely consequential evils of the world are generally assumed to be evils which a sovereign, omnipotent, monotheistic God could theoretically prevent, but chooses not to for reasons unknown to humanity. Cone attempts to circumvent this pitfall somewhat by employing a weak humanism; a humanism by which black people work in partnership with God, and God works in solidarity with the oppressed. It is complicated, however, by Cone’s refusal to relinquish his ideas regarding sovereignty and omnipotence. Again, it is important to point out that Cone recognizes that his ways of approaching an understanding of God as it pertains to the experiences of black people and their attempts to survive oppression and racism will not be logically persuasive to the scrutiny of critics such as Jones and Pinn. However, the analysis of Jones and Pinn is not as philosophical and analytical as Cone might insinuate. The validity of Jones’s and Pinn’s analysis comes into play when the experiences of black people no longer support the beliefs they hold about God, especially as it pertains to God’s sovereignty and omnipotence. Cone’s theological consistency in the midst of his emphasis upon survival within the black experience and Jones’s logical analysis in light of the existential realities of the black experience warrant a more detailed understanding of Jones’s critique of Cone’s logical inconsistencies.

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39. Ibid.

Jones believes that Cone “employs a concept of divine transcendence that appears to be identical to essential features of humanocentric theism.” God is ontologically sovereign; however, God has given humanity “functional control over human history.”<sup>40</sup> However, even this more humanly focused understanding of God’s attributes is problematic logically and philosophically for Cone’s Liberation Theology. Allowing God to be seen as sovereign, omnipotent, and omniscient, God’s character is still called into question if God is said to prioritize the freedom of the oppressed and the punishment of the oppressor. Is God omniscient?<sup>41</sup> If so, how could this omniscient God who hates suffering allow the magnitude and longevity of black suffering if knowing about it before it happened? How could this God do such a thing despite probably knowing about black suffering before giving the power of co-determination to human beings? Going even further, Jones asks, “[i]f God abhors human suffering, then how are we to account for its actual presence?” What support is there that God truly stands in solidarity with black people if oppression has been this long and hard? Would not the delay in actual realized liberation and the failure to mitigate some of the most heinous suffering suggest that at least the smallest part of suffering and white domination was part of the will of God? Does this not in some irrevocable way render Cone’s theodicy to be ineffective at the very least, if not invalidated? Jones asks if we can “affirm that black liberation is part of God’s innermost nature except on the basis of the actual liberation of blacks?” He goes even further by asking, “How can blacks know that God disapproves of black suffering except by [God’s] elimination of it, except by [God’s] bringing it to an immediate halt?”<sup>42</sup> Questions such

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40. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 108.

41. Edward Wierenga, “Omniscience,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/omniscience/>. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines omniscience as the property of having complete or maximal knowledge. Translating this concept into the realm of the finite, one considered to be omniscient has simultaneous knowledge of past, present, and future.

42. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 113-15.

as these posed by Jones demonstrate that, even though Black Liberation Theology's humanocentric theism moves further along a theistic spectrum than most of the fundamentalist white Christian theocentric theologies, there are other points in the theological spectrum that Jones considers to be more trustworthy than Black Liberation Theologies.<sup>43</sup>

Jones proposes a humanocentric theism that goes significantly further than the humanocentric theism of Black Liberation Theology. While it may still be considered a weak version of humanism in the theological spectrum, it is a theological model where humanity is given ultimacy by God in terms of participation in the activities of human history. Jones's proposed humanocentric theism has the human being possessing the primordial ontological status of codetermining power as a product of created humanity's intrinsic human nature.<sup>44</sup> This status of codetermining power is not reserved for God's predetermined elect, nor is it granted on an individual basis to someone as a result of her salvation. It is also not a status seen to rival or threaten God's attributes of omnipotence and sovereignty. Most importantly to this expansion of the theological model, humanity's codetermining status is "in total conformity with the sovereignty, purpose, and will of God."<sup>45</sup> At the same time, however, God's choice regarding the codetermination of human beings alternatively results in the sovereignty of God ultimately being "limited by the choices and acts of [humanity]."<sup>46</sup> The most important distinction of this humanocentric theism is that God's self-imposed limitation regarding humanity's actions and choices makes the outcome of good versus evil undetermined. The future is truly in the possession of humanity; there are no guaranteed victories and no assurances that "it will all work out in the end." In this theistic spectrum, God relates to humanity through "persuasion and not

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43. Ibid., 186.

44. Ibid., 188.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., 191.

coercion.”<sup>47</sup> This is not the theocentric God bending and molding human history into a God-shaped design as a potter does with clay; rather, this God serves ontologically as efficient cause and thus distinct from humanity, while operating functionally as facilitator of human freedom. As such, this God cannot be invoked as being responsible for any side’s prevailing outcome. As Jones notes, by “removing God’s overruling sovereignty from human history,” and by replacing it with the concepts of “divine persuasion and functional ultimacy,” human history can then be seen as one in which “the interplay of human power centers and alignments is decisive.” Racism, therefore, cannot be attributed to either explicit divine decree or tacit divine acceptance. Human beings, and not God, are implicated. Human beings, and not God, are responsible as to whether there will be retribution, restitution, or perpetuation. For Jones, theodicy has been satisfied.

Jones, referencing Howard R. Burkle’s *The Non-Existent God*, believes that there is little difference between humanocentric theism and secular or atheistic theism. Jones quotes Burkle directly: “Pragmatically speaking, believing in a persuading God and believing in no God at all come to very much the same thing.”<sup>48</sup> The reality of this statement makes this type of humanocentric theism extremely problematic for classical Christian theology.<sup>49</sup> For those who feel they must protect the integrity of theological orthodoxy, as well as those resistant to the existential ambiguity arising from the idea of a God who does not dictate or mandate outcomes, this type of theism is unacceptable. On the other hand, the pragmatic existential reality posed by a theism that is essentially the same as atheism is exactly the theological opening necessary to

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47. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*, 191.

48. *Ibid.*, 196.

49. It is important to note that various theologies, such as Process Theology and possibly some polytheistic and indigenous theologies have a different ontology regarding deity; as a result, no such conclusion would be made in terms of equating the existence of a persuasive God and what one would consider to be an atheistic perspective. Again, the assumptions here are that the God being discussed is the more traditional viewpoints regarding the omnipotence of the Christian God.



take the next step towards the type of strong humanism that Pinn advocates. Pinn relies on the work of Jones, ultimately stretching his own theological methodology to embrace the end of God-talk itself.

### **Pinn's African American Nontheistic Humanist Theology**

Pinn uses the foundational thoughts of Jones and advances further, proposing the idea of an African American Nontheistic Humanist Theology. Like various forms of liberal theological traditions—including Black Liberation, and Womanist theologies—Pinn's AANHT privileges and prioritizes humanity. In other words, AANHT responds fundamentally to existential concerns and realities. AANHT seeks to draw “from the best of the liberal theology tradition and the existential edge (and social critique) of black religious thought.” Pinn's resulting religious thought is founded on a rejection of “transcendence and the divine.”<sup>50</sup> More importantly, AANHT also seeks a different politics of identity, one different from both the idea of the death of God and liberation theology. This politics of identity has to do with “conscious experience” as experience of physical phenomena rather than supernatural. AANHT seeks the most robust embodied theology possible, one where God is symbol only and denied any “real substance.” As such, this symbolic God is not only immaterial, but non-existent; the concept of the *imago Dei* is therefore rendered impossible for humanity. In contrast, AANHT seeks an embodied theological anthropology where self as subject is already always tied to and dependent upon the body and that body's occupation of time and space.<sup>51</sup> While the majority of my analysis addresses Pinn's more developed arguments for an AANHT and a proposed end to “God-Talk,” I begin with an

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50. Pinn, *End of God-Talk*, 139.

51. *Ibid.*, 47-48.

overview of the development of Pinn's thoughts regarding theodicy and embodiment, as well as the amalgamation of both concepts into his latest research.

Pinn's idea of an AANHT developed over time. Bolstered by IGWR, Pinn wrote *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* and *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theology*. In *Why Lord?* Pinn retraces the steps of Jones's research, ultimately adding to it the idea of a "nitty-gritty" hermeneutic. He proposes that this nitty-gritty hermeneutic is one that "differs from the hermeneutic of liberative suspicion in that it is not wed to the same doctrinal or theological presuppositions"—such as God's omnibenevolence—that are assumed by liberation theologies. As a result, this hermeneutic is one that can present "Black life with its full complexity, untainted by static tradition."<sup>52</sup>

During this stage of Pinn's work, he emphasizes Jones's critique regarding Black and Womanist theologians, asserting that they cannot defend against the charge of divine racism. Pinn presses forward, and questions whether Jones's' weak humanism actually challenges "the assumed positive intentions of God?" Pinn goes on to conclude that "it appears humanocentric theism implicitly suggests good intentions on the part of God."<sup>53</sup> Pinn concludes this because Jones's research does not suggest that God's acts of persuasion—necessary in a weak humanism where God's omnipotence is self-limited—are anything but positive. Regardless of Jones's supposed silence regarding God's assumed omnibenevolence, Pinn asks where "are the acts of persuasion which allow [us] to believe God is not malicious?" He further asks whether God's self-limitations are examples of God's "respect for freedom or [rather] a back-handed form of

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52. Pinn, *Why Lord?*, 116.

53. *Ibid.*, 97.

racism?" He goes on to conclude that "a reduction in God's authority out of respect for humanity does not suggest positive intentions on God's part."<sup>54</sup> For Pinn, God's persuasive activities could just as possibly be a means of persuading whites to oppress blacks, as it might be for God to motivate liberative actions on behalf of the oppressed.

Pinn's questioning of God's assumed omnibenevolence is crucial because any such assumption—even in the case of weak humanism—creates the possibility for the idea of redemptive suffering. Pinn plainly asserts that "the existence of a benevolent God who allows suffering (through an act of restraint) suggests the possibility of the permitted suffering being redemptive."<sup>55</sup> Pinn rejects the idea of redemptive suffering above all else. He goes further to conclude that "only a questioning of God's existence" allows for a complete and total rejection of redemptive suffering.<sup>56</sup> As a result, Pinn rejects weak humanism and advocates strong humanism. Strong humanism "brings into question the presence of any Being outside of the human realm." Under strong humanism, God is neither omnibenevolent nor evil; God merely doesn't exist: "Strong humanism considers theistic answers to existential questions simplistic and geared toward psychological comfort without respect for the complex nature of the human condition."<sup>57</sup> Of course, when Pinn makes mention of psychological comfort, he is critiquing Cone's assertion that faith in the shared suffering of Christ and his subsequent resurrection gave Black people the strength to survive racism and oppression. He finds Cone's explanation to be not only simplistic, but inadequate to understanding the human condition of African Americans. For Pinn, the world's problems are caused by humans, and can only be solved by humans. Strong

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54. Pinn, *Why Lord?*, 98.

55. *Ibid.*, 99.

56. *Ibid.*, 147.

57. *Ibid.*, 141-42.

humanism “cannot be addressed using theodicy.” Theodicy is insufficient because “theodicy requires a compromise with suffering [...]” Theodicy is deficient in that it “assumes the goodness of God and requires the finding of something useful in human suffering.”<sup>58</sup>

With the rejection of weak humanism, and the embrace of a strong, atheistic humanism, what is left in the realm of theology for Pinn? He begins the next step of his theological exploration with the book, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought*. In this work, Pinn asserts that its purpose is “to point in the direction of a body-centered approach to theological thought whereby the body’s meaning and lived experience are prioritized and used as a starting point for the doing of theology.”<sup>59</sup> Under this rubric of focusing on the physical body as a locus point for theologizing, Pinn accuses Black Theology of having a troubled relationship to black bodies, despite black theology’s arguments for liberation. To Pinn, Black theology has given little attention to the body’s physical dimensions of existence; leaving the body to be understood as a vague metaphor in the debate as to the shape and purpose of social structures.<sup>60</sup> Pinn asserts that Black theology’s representational classification of black bodies is materially empty. Because of this emptiness, Pinn suggests that the manner in which issues of racism are measured is warped from the very beginning. Because of Black theology’s distorted view of racism, assessments of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural progress—and ultimately, liberation—are difficult to assess in terms of their meaning, nature, function, and purpose.<sup>61</sup>

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58. Pinn, *Why Lord?*, 19.

59. Anthony B. Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 3.

60. *Ibid.*, 3.

61. *Ibid.*, 4.

As a result, Pinn introduces examples of theological thinking that see the body not only as physical reality, but also as a metaphor for society's social structure.<sup>62</sup> Pinn looks at embodiment in two components; he promotes the body "as developed and defined by social structures (e.g. discourse)," and "as biochemical reality [...] that is not captured through abstract references to social mechanism and epistemological structures."<sup>63</sup> In other words, Pinn sees "the body as both cultural production and material reality."<sup>64</sup> Pinn leans upon the research of Michel Foucault for some of his understanding of the body. Pinn sees power structures such as white supremacy as limiting the scope of black bodies, both in terms of their reality within social and epistemological structures, as well as in their existence as material, fleshy reality. White supremacy does not view black bodies as fully capable, multifaceted agents of dignity, value, and creativity. Instead black bodies are objectified as fixed, truncated realities incapable of change and unable to be seen as diverse realities either socially, intellectually, or physically. Pinn describes this type of rigid understanding of black bodies as having removed black bodies from the realm of human beings with human dignity. As such, black bodies are perceived as "having no positive relationship to intelligence, civil liberties, privileged social spaces and the like."<sup>65</sup>

Pinn's recognition of how black bodies are viewed in a white supremacist society has resulted in horrible consequences of such assessments in the realities of our contemporary society. One of the best contemporary examples of this is the merger of capitalism and the incarceration of black bodies to create the prison industrial complex. The institution of slavery profited upon black bodies, and history records the legalized physical separation of black bodies

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62. Ibid., 11.

63. Pinn, *Embodiment*, 5.

64. Ibid., 9.

65. Ibid., 6.

from privileged white spaces during Jim Crow and segregation. In both of these situations, blacks were deemed unfit for freedom, agency, and the sharing of public spaces with civilized white society. Our current domestic situation finds many black bodies incarcerated and forcibly set apart, having been pronounced unfit for freedom and removed from the presumably law abiding, predominantly white society.<sup>66</sup> In fact, black bodies are so disposable due to their assumed dangerous nature that there are more than a few black bodies, having been prejudged as threats even when they are known to have been weaponless, whose lives have been extinguished by vigilantes and law enforcement.<sup>67</sup> These examples bear out Pinn's call for a more robust consideration of embodiment. Black theology has ineffectively defined understandings of the complexities of oppression, liberation, and power relations, especially as they relate to embodiment. For these reasons, Pinn places theological importance on these areas.

Pinn places great importance on the mesh of power dynamics cloaking the complex relationship between oppression, liberation, and existing organizational power structures. Because of this reality, Pinn believes the struggle against oppression must be more robust and meaningful than that proposed by many liberation theologies. Pinn accuses black theologies in particular of failing to "recognize the ways in which it states its critique from within the very structures of knowledge it finds troubling." This particular failure on the part of black theologies

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66. Additional information regarding the prison industrial complex can be found in the groundbreaking book by Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012).

67. Black Lives Matter, organized by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, was created in 2013 in response to the tragic and unjustified killing of Trayvon Martin. After the acquittal of Trayvon's killer, the vigilante George Zimmerman, Black Lives Matter began to mobilize to protest "violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes." With the police related killings of Tamir Rice, Tanisha Anderson, Mya Hall, Walter Scott, Sandra Bland—and the list continues to grow—Black Lives Matter has been an organizing tool for protests that shine light on continuing state-sanctioned violence against African-Americans. More information about the organization can be found at their website:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20181025185226/https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/herstory/>

comes specifically from having theologies “based on the same knowledge sources [i.e. Christian theology] used to define and safeguard restrictive and subjecting arrangements.”<sup>68</sup> As a result, Pinn declares that theology and theologians “cannot step outside of power relations and the workings of discourse.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, they are still inadequately prepared to struggle against attempts to truncate and control black bodies into submission and conformity to the dominant systemic structure. He proposes that there must be a “recognition of multiple representations of the body, the manner in which the body is really bodies or ‘multiplicity of bodies [...].’”<sup>70</sup> Pinn concludes that the recognition of the complex multiplicity of embodiment requires human dedication to participation with a great many disciplinary points of view, with diverse modes of interpretation, and without reliance on an inadequate—indeed, non-existent—deity.

To summarize and reemphasize, embodiment is a crucial, indispensable aspect of Pinn’s embryonic theology. For Pinn, the body is the center of theology. As a result, it is imperative for an embodied theology to be aware of the complexities of the body in everyday life, from its social status and participation in society, to how it participates in making life meaningful, to how it is treated by one’s self and others. Of course, theologizing also includes the material constitution of the body, from its health, to its well-being and self-care, to the conditions of the various locations where it takes up space and time. Embodiment is so important to Pinn that he believes that, without an intentional focus on the bodies of African-Americans encompassed in all of their multiplicities and sources of cultural production and inclusion in (and/or exclusion from) social systems, a theologian will have a distorted view of all the sociopolitical, economic,

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68. Pinn, *Embodiment*, 6-7.

69. Ibid., 10.

70. Pinn, *Embodiment*, 10-11.

cultural, and liberative factors affecting African Americans. In other words, embodiment is essential to being able to most clearly assess—in terms of meaning, nature, function, and purpose—the systemic structures that alter African-American bodies. On the other hand, Pinn accuses Womanist and Black Liberation theologies of being woefully inadequate in terms of embodiment because they are confined within the Christian theological system, and the extent of their theology of the body comes from the *imago dei*. Because they are already confined within, and marred by, Christian theology, the breadth and depth of their analytical and creative thoughts regarding liberation are already sorely limited. Of course, Pinn already believes that idolatrous monotheism has historically been used as a means of keeping the oppressed in their truncated physical, societal, economic, and political spaces. For Pinn, those without a robust understanding of embodiment are simply ill prepared for the multifaceted attempts to subdue, to dominate, and often, to destroy black bodies.

Pinn recognizes that black bodies are participants in the social system, developed by social and epistemological structures, and entangled as complex multiplicities in socio-politically and economically racist systems that outstrip even its most virulent oppressors. He believes that “simplistic” theologies are ill equipped to deal with this web of interdependency. Pinn’s theologizing on embodiment matures and becomes more definitive in his African American Nontheistic Humanist Theology.

### **Pinn’s AANHT and The End of God-Talk**

In *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology*, Pinn moves forward with his ideas regarding theodicy, humanism, and embodiment. Fighting once again to broaden the spectrum of theological methodology, Pinn takes a fairly significant portion of the text



explaining how AANHT is, in fact, a theology. He agrees that theology traditionally involves the study of God. However, he refutes this limited interpretation. For Pinn, “Theology need not revolve around attempts to prove the existence of God, or to articulate the ramifications of this existence.” For Pinn, the study of God is only one mode of theological inquiry, and not the only means of theological study. He asserts that, while “there are certain modalities of theological discourse that lack the perspective and grounding necessary to offer balanced and reasonable answers to pressing moral and ethical questions,” he still believes that “there are ways in which the basic structural arrangements and moral/ethical markers within theological discourse still have some utility.”<sup>71</sup> With this reasoning, and with the precedent set by Jones in advocating an expanded interpretation of the theological spectrum, Pinn begins laying the foundation for AANHT. However, Pinn’s insistence on working within the confines of theological methodology, and even more importantly, his severe restrictions regarding God and God-talk, open his system up to some of the same types of criticisms he assesses against classical monotheistic Christian, Womanist and Black Liberation theologies. I address Pinn’s idolatry further in a later section of this chapter, as well as in the concluding chapter.

The cornerstone of Pinn’s AANHT is the declaration that God must be understood as being nothing more than an outmoded, ineffectual, dysfunctional, and completely irrelevant symbol. Pinn is so adamant regarding the pragmatic uselessness of God that he will not even allow God to be thought of as dead as postulated by the so-called “Death of God” theologians. Pinn does not desire that an irreformable, irreparable God be forced to “die” because that God no longer suited the needs of human beings. Pinn sees that the attempted negation of God through

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71. Pinn, *End of God –Talk*, 3.

the death of God still asserts a past time presence of God, as well as God's contemporary absence. AANHT rejects any realism attributed to God. AANHT demands the end of talk about God; it requires leaving behind not only the labels and terminology of Christianity, but even leaving behind the black church. For Pinn, the result of this wholesale banishment of God, is the need to reformulate the entire concept of theology. For Pinn and AANHT, theology takes on a new meaning. Pinn's new definition of theology is that it is "a method for critically engaging, articulating, and discussing the deep existential and ontological issues endemic to human life."<sup>72</sup> Pinn's AANHT relies on three significant concepts in his theology: complex subjectivity, community, and theological anthropology. These topics are densely intertwined with each other, such that one cannot be fully understood without knowledge and discussion of the others.

### ***Complex Subjectivity***

The focus of AANHT is the quest for complex subjectivity. According to Pinn, complex subjectivity involves the search for meaning in its most significant forms. Pinn draws a comparison to religion in that religious experience is religious because of the means by which it addresses the search for meaning. For AANHT, complex subjectivity is "humanistic in that meaning does not entail transcendence beyond this world, and it is African American because it is shaped by and within the context of African American historical realities and cultural creations."<sup>73</sup> With the idea of complex subjectivity, Pinn seeks to restore value to life. In contrast to Christian theology's reification of all things sacred—such as church buildings, religious

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72. Pinn, *End of God-Talk*, 6.

73. Pinn, *End of God-Talk*, 7.

symbols and piety—Pinn adopts an almost Nietzschean call for life as a whole to be lived.

Complex subjectivity asserts that life is meaningful simply because it is life. Contrary to Nietzsche, however, Pinn does not call for a life driven by a “will to power” except to the extent that the zest for life involves the drive and the courage to fight for liberation.

Complex subjectivity searches for the meaningfulness of life in the most mundane things. The search for meaning can take place with friends at a coffee shop, or within the camaraderie experienced in the neighborhood barbershop, and even in painful life situations, such as broken relationships, shady business deals, and grieving the loss of loved ones. Life is complex, but the everyday complexities are valuable. Living itself is meaningful in AANHT.

### ***Community***

The idea of community is the crucial linchpin to his AANHT. He was adamant that his precept of community is differentiated from the Beloved Community advocated by Dr. King. The phrase “beloved community” originated with Josiah Royce, the leading proponent of absolute idealism in early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy.<sup>74</sup> Charles Marsh makes reference to the early understandings of beloved community, remarking that this beloved community had no need for transcendence. Instead, Royce saw the beloved community as something inevitably arising from the historical evolution and progression of the human experience towards liberalistic ideas of perfectibility and religious ethics. Yet, progress is never guaranteed and should not be

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74. Kelly A. Parker, “Josiah Royce”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2014, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/royce/>. The influence of Royce’s thought upon King’s proposed understandings of the Beloved Community are highly debated, and it is way beyond the focus and scope of this work to posit a theory as to the level of Royce’s influence. However, it is interesting to note that Royce’s metaphysical view—also held by Hegel—was one in which all of reality is ultimately unified in a single, all-encompassing consciousness. It is also interesting to note, as does Kipton Jensen, that W. E. B. DuBois studied under Royce at Harvard, and was later a teacher of Howard Thurman at Morehouse College. See Jensen, “The Growing Edges of Beloved Community: From Royce to Thurman and King,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 52, no. 2 (2016):239-58.

assumed—especially in the times of Jim Crow, segregation, and the violent violation of African Americans’ civil and human rights.

By the time King had adopted the idea of the beloved community, he did not have the luxury of waiting upon the evolution of humanity, or trusting in the innate goodness of human ethics. To the contrary, as Marsh comments, the beloved community for King became that which required God to act “from beginning to end [as] the ultimate agent of human liberation.”<sup>75</sup> It would take God’s power to give people the power to love one another, forgive one another, and to be reconciled to one another. In fact, as Marsh observes, the beloved community is “established by the ‘great event on Calvary,’ ‘the great event that stands at the center of our faith.’ ”<sup>76</sup> King himself spells it out even more poignantly. King asserts that “[t]he cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community.”<sup>77</sup> Not only that, but he declares that, [h]e who works against the community is working against the whole of creation.<sup>78</sup> In the context of King and the Civil Rights movement, the beloved community was the tying together of agape love and non-violence; it was the result of redemption and reconciliation. Furthermore, agape love is the “insistence on community even when one seeks to break it;” it is “a willingness to go to any length to restore community.”<sup>79</sup>

Quite to the contrary of the characteristics that King values, Pinn believes the Beloved Community is too relationship oriented and too restrictive. Pinn also believes that Beloved Community is too dependent on an implicit, de facto expectation/requirement that the Beloved

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75. Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 50.

76. Ibid.

77. Martin Luther King, Jr., “An Experiment in Love,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 20.

78. King, “An Experiment in Love,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 20.

79. Ibid., 18-19.

Community will result in God ordained communion, mutual dependency, and unity for all.<sup>80</sup>

Pinn notes that those who “embrace the theory of the Beloved Community [...] assume community can be fostered, nudged, [...] created and [...] understood.” More saliently, Pinn notes that advocates of the Beloved Community are “frustrated and disappointed” when they are unable to create and foster community. Pinn criticizes King and the Beloved Community for their dependence upon God; Pinn’s assessment is that this dependence on God ultimately results in the failure of the Beloved Community. According to Pinn, community founded on God and Christianity cannot simply create or manufacture Godly communion, mutual dependency or unity. If those seeking the Beloved Community believe that they can generate and facilitate the unrealistic community they expect, then the oppressors will continue to oppress with impunity, those “participating” in the struggle for liberation will be disappointed, and the oppressed themselves will continue to suffer. Not only will the oppressed continue to suffer, but, according to Pinn, they will suffer while simultaneously being deluded into believing their suffering is redeeming the soul and humanity of their oppressor.

Although Pinn rejected the concept of the Beloved Community, the idea of community was so crucial to Pinn that community originally took the place of God in Pinn’s AANHT. In a journal article for the Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association published before *The End of God-talk*, Pinn explicitly states that he desires a humanist theology that “holds community rather than God as the center of life altering questions.”<sup>81</sup> In contrast to the Beloved Community, Pinn proposes that community can best be encapsulated in the characteristics of nonconformity and

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80. Pinn, *End of God Talk*, 30-36.

81. Anthony B. Pinn, “Anybody There? Reflections on African-American Humanism,” *Religious Humanism*, 31 no. 3 (1997). <http://humanists.org/publications/journal/anybody-there-reflections-african-american-humanism>

uncertainty. Pinn declares that community in AANHT is “not reducible to relationships” or to “interactions definable by an array of sociopolitical, economical, and cultural patterns.” Pinn’s interpretation of community has no “fixed assumptions concerning notions of good and bad.” Pinn asserts that AANHT community “pulls at embodiment and its consequences and exposes it for what it is and what it is not—laying bare the limits and importance of the empty spots in its geography.”<sup>82</sup> Most importantly, community for Pinn “has more to do with what is not achieved, what is not captured, than the manner in which we arrange and display relationships, no matter how complex they are.”<sup>83</sup>

For Pinn, community has to do with relationships that are ambiguous, with outcomes that are unsure, and with participants who are restless and wandering.<sup>84</sup> In other words, community allows for human beings to be human, in all of their fallible and finite ways. Community in AANHT, as a theological category, is another means by which nontheistic theology takes place. As it pertains to the community advocated by AANHT, heartaches, restlessness, and difficulties with intimacy/ interpersonal relationships are appreciated for what they are and what they are not, rather than being either worshipped or despised.<sup>85</sup>

### ***Theological Anthropology***

Pinn defines theological anthropology as “the articulation of the embodied self as aware—the chronicling of the embodied self’s engagement with the world as related to the quest for complex subjectivity.”<sup>86</sup> Theological anthropology, for Pinn, is the human being’s awareness

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82. Pinn, *End of God- Talk*, 39-40.

83. Ibid, 40.

84. Ibid, 42.

85. Ibid., 42-43.

86. Pinn, *End of God Talk*, 45.

of its world as the human being searches for and/or generates its own complex subjectivity. For Pinn's AANHT, anything having to do with the human self, especially as it pertains to black bodies and black embodiment, cannot be properly analyzed until God is considered nothing more than an irrelevant, non-existent symbol. AANHT totally rejects tying embodiment to the divine in any way. Pinn notes that Black Liberation and Womanist theologies of the past used an identification with the image of God to restore human dignity to black people and give them strength and courage to fight on against their oppressors. In fact, Black and Womanist theologies take the ultimate theological step in their faith paradigms when they proclaim that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed to the fullest extent, such that God ontologically identifies as black.<sup>87</sup>

However, as mentioned earlier, AANHT rejects all identification with the *imago Dei*. AANHT refuses to allow the legitimization of any of the "old formulations of the nature and meaning of divinity and transcendence." Pinn does not want his desired understanding of embodiment to be rendered empty and worthless by being associated with a nonexistent God. Pinn's theological anthropology can be summed up as an understanding of the significance of multifaceted representation of black bodies—for example, the fleshly physical body, the culturally produced body, and the body as valued within the existing sociopolitical, economic systemic structure—existentially experiencing concern "with the uncertainty of human life." Yet, theologically and anthropologically, the concept of embodiment is expanded to understand the value of "the ups and downs of human endeavors and relationships [sic] as having significance in and of themselves," without any supernatural safeguards or interventions.<sup>88</sup> Pinn's theological

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87. Ibid., 44.

88. Pinn, *End of God-Talk*, 48-49.

anthropology attempts to define value for African Americans and their human experiences as black people to not only persevere, but also to manifest hope in themselves for their eventual liberation.

### **Postscript and Commentary on Pinn's Idolatry**

In Pinn's newly released twentieth year anniversary edition republication of *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, Pinn added a new preface and an epilogue to update his readers on the evolution of his theological views since the book's initial publication. The epilogue/ final chapter of the text elaborates on a few evolutions in his theological thinking during and since the publishing of *The End of God-Talk*. In this epilogue, Pinn reveals more regarding his declaration that humanism is a religious system. He also discusses his evolved thoughts regarding nihilism, struggle, and liberation. I elaborate briefly on some of the key points in the epilogue because some of his additional explications are useful to me in further determining the apophatic methodology that could achieve his goals while still maintaining an avenue for god-talk.

In *The End of God-Talk*, Pinn strives to have his African American Non-theistic Humanism recognized as a theology, almost along the same lines and in the same manner as other religions would fit into a theological category; however, sans God. In *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, however, he further details his evolution. In *Varieties*, he reveals that he wants humanism to be thought of as theology because he wants to "expose the inner logic of African American religion(s) in a way that doesn't privilege a particular tradition," and because he wants to establish a different "starting point for a theology that could interrogate



religion without assuming a particular tradition.”<sup>89</sup> In so doing, Pinn’s stated goal is to “expose theology for what it is: a methodological tool.”<sup>90</sup> For Pinn, religion and theology are now technologies or strategies. In other words, they are tools “for wrestling with the fundamental questions of human existence.” Human experience generates questions, and religion is a human generated device that structures these ordinary experiences such that they can be discussed in ways common to those participating in and agreeing to a particular religious language, vocabulary, and grammatical structure<sup>91</sup>—a language game, if one uses Wittgenstein’s terminology. Pinn will see religion and theology in no other way. He is staunchly determined to do “theology without theology (i.e. ‘god-talk’).”<sup>92</sup>

Pinn’s thoughts regarding liberation, struggle, and nihilism are interrelated in their evolutions. The idea of liberation had, for Pinn, been the desire for the well-being of African Americans in personal and public life so as to promote socio-political, economic and cultural conditions for a community free from the modalities of oppression that truncate Black life. It had the connotation that liberation, as an endpoint, was something that could be attained. Pinn has come to see that liberation theologies, as well as his initial attitudes towards liberation, were “too hopeful without adequate grounding for that hope.” He goes on to assert that “the language of liberation,” especially as it pertains to liberation theologies, connotes the hope for a predetermined outcome based on a God with a predilection for the oppressed.<sup>93</sup> Pinn’s understanding of liberation, and his use of liberation as viable terminology, changed for numerous reasons. One such reason for his changes was a growing awareness of the interrelated,

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89. Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, Location 271.

90. Ibid.

91. Ibid., Location 261-66

92. Ibid., Location 260.

93. Ibid., Location 273-75.

intersectional intricacies of oppression. He noted that combating one aspect of oppression, such as racism, did not automatically eradicate misogyny, homophobia, or classism. As Pinn astutely asserts, “in each moment of success [against injustice] hides a moment of disregard experienced by others.”<sup>94</sup>

Pinn’s change in his understanding of liberation correlates with his understanding of the idea of struggle. Regarding struggle, Pinn determines it to be the “various ways in which groups of humans fight against their dehumanization and work to promote modalities of existence that are healthy and affirming.”<sup>95</sup> Pairing his understanding of the interrelated, intersectional intricacies of oppression with his understanding of struggle, Pinn recognizes that the struggle against oppression comes with it an acknowledgment that one who struggles must also speak “against one’s own privilege and social standing,” since those struggling against oppression often have privileges that can potentially disadvantage others to varying degrees. He also recognizes that the multitudinously complex facets of oppression rule out the possibility of ever “achieving” liberation, regardless of the way in which humans attempt to define it. Successes are few, victories are short-lived, and the alleviation of social conditions in one area often manifest revelations of deficiencies in multiple different, unexpected avenues.

As a result, he reassesses his understanding of struggle, expanding its connotation to encompass the perpetual battle against dehumanization.<sup>96</sup> The emphasis here, however, is on perpetuity; noticeably absent is optimism that any particular outcome will be achieved. Pinn, in line with the thought of Albert Camus’s Myth of Sisyphus, places value on the effort expended in the process of the struggle. He asserts that, “struggle isn’t a means to an end; rather, it is what

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94. Ibid.

95. Ibid., Location 271.

96. Ibid., Location 270-75.

we have—what we can muster based on human potential and tendencies.” For Pinn, the struggle itself reflects human agency and the primacy of life over and against dehumanization and the death dealing effects of oppression.<sup>97</sup>

Pinn, in the context of his ideas regarding liberation and struggle, finally speaks on the issue of nihilism. For Pinn, the primary issue of nihilism involves the perceived meaninglessness oppressed people are feared to experience if they recognize that victory in their struggle against oppression is not necessarily guaranteed. In other words, esteemed leaders including Dr. King and Dr. Cone were concerned that African Americans might become discouraged and buckle under the pressure of incessant dehumanization without the firm belief that an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God would eventually deliver them from their oppressors. However, Pinn’s firm belief is that life and humanity mean struggle. As such, struggle should not even be approached from a standpoint of hope or pragmatism. As Pinn declares, he is “a moralist-absurdist doing theology who finds even the measured stance of meliorism dissatisfying,” because he finds meliorism too hopeful.<sup>98</sup> All of these thoughts by Pinn regarding liberation and struggle come together to reflect the reality that Pinn needs no remedy for nihilism. He believes, unreservedly, that human efforts to vanquish the dehumanizing, oppressive systemic entities in existence are not enough. Hence, there is no “liberation,” only struggle. However, he also believes that knowledge of this reality, along with the corresponding expectations concomitant with the limitations of the human situation, are enough to forestall nihilism and its affects.

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97. Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*, Location 273.

98. Ibid., Location 276.

In summary, in this chapter I have detailed the origins of Pinn's African-American Non-Theistic Humanist Theology. I began with exploring the influence William R. Jones's humanocentric theism had upon Pinn's thoughts; from there I observed his own beginnings postulating an embodied theology. Pinn railed against God's assumed omnibenevolence, against the idea of redemptive suffering, and against having God involved in any way with the idea of human embodiment. As a result, Pinn's AANHT had none of those three features within it. More importantly, Pinn banned God from his theological construct, and banned the possibility of God-talk within that realm. Finally, I discussed in the postscript that Pinn dismissed concerns regarding nihilism, due to his evolving understandings of the viability of liberation and the immeasurable value of struggle. In the next chapter, I discuss Marion's understanding and definition of idolatry, which will provide a more focused understanding of the idolatry of Pinn's AANHT.

### **CHAPTER THREE: MARION'S APOPHATIC PHENOMENOLOGY**

Jean-Luc Marion's Apophatic Phenomenology is a useful philosophical paradigm for analyzing whether Pinn's African American Nontheistic Humanist Theology is idolatrous. It is a useful paradigm because, within it, Marion has defined idolatry, and he has developed a philosophical means of overcoming it. I find Pinn's call for the end of God-talk to be problematic and idolatrous. I am proposing Black Apophatic Phenomenology—based on the apophasis of Marion—as the solution to this problem. In this chapter I discuss how Marion defines idolatry and how he goes about fashioning the philosophical system that overcomes it. I begin the chapter with a discussion of Marion's investigation of onto-theology and the limits of metaphysics—two by-products of the interaction between theology and philosophy in the Western world. Next, I discuss Marion's movement into phenomenology and his subsequent definition of idolatry. After discussing Marion and idolatry, I explicate saturated phenomena and how Marion's understanding of these permeative experiences affect the possibilities for idolatry and revelation. Finally, I cover Marion's process of de-nomination. Marion's de-nomination is a methodological process that facilitates thinking of and addressing God in a manner that is not idolatrous.

#### **Onto-theology, Metaphysics, and Phenomenology**

Jean-Luc Marion describes idolatry as the appropriated essence of the divine; a condition that arises theologically and philosophically from confusion and conflation between metaphysics and ontology. To explain this, Marion looks to specify the overarching reason for the confusion between metaphysics—expressed theologically—and philosophical ontology. Marion asserts that theology works with and within the realm of revelation, while the criterion in which philosophy operates involves issues such as the Being of beings, as recognized in Heidegger's ontology. In

recognizing this dichotomy, both Heidegger and Marion recognize that theology and philosophy do not have direct areas of commonality. Theology is a discourse that is oriented around faith. With faith as its criteria and its measure, it has no cause or means by which to certify philosophical concepts such as ontology and Being. In the same vein, philosophy has no means by which to adequately address theology, since its discourse is based on questions and proofs, rather than faith. As Marion states, “neither [theology nor philosophy] can ... comprehend one another.” Furthermore, there will be no other mediating factor that will “ever present itself to reconcile them, to the extent that ‘in the face of the final decision, the ways part.’”<sup>99</sup>

Despite the assertion of the separation of foci for theology and philosophy in attempting to address the divine, Marion recognizes that the two unique areas have become almost hopelessly intertwined throughout their history. Given the phenomenological understanding of the Being of beings as primordial to human existence, and the attempt of theology to understand the divine as that which is the highest in the realm of beings—which Marion refers to as theology—there has been the temptation to turn the faith-based discourse of theology into one involving the ontological concept of Being—thus, onto-theology. As Paul DeHart observes, “If being-qua-being is the abstract power of being shared by entities, the highest being is the entity that enables this participation.” The result of this is that theology becomes involved, such that ontology is the study of being in general, and theology becomes intertwined in the part of metaphysics that discusses and analyzes the “highest being.”<sup>100</sup>

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99. Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 63.

100. Paul DeHart, “The Ambiguous Infinite: Jungel, Marion, and the God of Descartes,” *Journal of Religion*, 82, no. 1 (2002): 81.

However, as Marion notes, even Heidegger himself rejected such a notion. Marion quotes him as saying that “Being and God are not identical, and I would never attempt to think the essence of God by means of Being.” Marion goes on further to observe that for Heidegger “[f]aith does not need the thought of Being,” because “[w]hen faith has recourse to this thought [of Being] it is no longer faith.”<sup>101</sup> And yet, even though Heidegger declares that faith is no longer faith when theologians equate the essence of God with Being, theology and theologians became guilty of the theological equivalent of philosophy’s onto-theology; in other words, their pursuit of theology turned into the pursuit of “theiology.”

For Marion, “theiology” involves theology obtaining knowledge of the “being par excellence.”<sup>102</sup> When referring to the concept of a “being par excellence” the conversation turns to one in which ontological being participates in a discourse that Marion no longer deems as theology, but rather as theiology. Theiology utilizes the concept of being such that the knowledge of the divine is derived from the assumption that God must be the highest of all beings. Marion concludes that this science of beings, this first philosophy qua ontology, this theology of what truly is, is in itself onto-theological.

For Marion, theiology is also guilty of onto-theology. Philosophers seeking certainties, universalities, and absolutes within their metaphysical theories utilize language that strongly suggests some sort of Ultimate Source, if not making an outright, explicit reference to the God of Western Christianity. Examples that follow involving Hegel, Kant and Nietzsche are examples of philosophers who use the term “God” onto-theologically to refer to the highest being and the ultimate source in their philosophical structures. Hegelian scholar Anselm Min notes that in

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101. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 61.

102. *Ibid.*, 63.

Hegel's understanding and development of the structure of dialectic truth for human existence, Christianity is "the 'absolute' religion because its triune God fulfills the requirements of the absolute Spirit." Min further observes that Hegel's "God is not only infinite but also relates [God's self] to the created world of nature and human spirits," by "remaining present to the world as the Spirit of the human community, reconciling the finite and the infinite, the individual and the social, [and] overcoming all the alienating dualisms of human existence."<sup>103</sup>

While Hegel is not considered to be a theologian, his express use of religion in general, and Christianity in particular, in demonstrating and explicating aspects of his philosophy certainly demonstrate that his philosophical structure seeks that which will functionally serve as the system's universal and absolute. Marion notes that God is also relegated and regionalized as the "ultimate foundation" in the philosophies of Leibniz, and as the "God of morality" in Kant and Fichte, as well as Nietzsche. However, perhaps the most widely acknowledged philosophical regionalization of God comes from the understanding of God as the *causa sui*. This understanding is so widely accepted that it is, for all intents and purposes, the foundational ground for all of metaphysics. Given God's inclusion in the realm of metaphysics as the ultimate cause, philosophical metaphysics is deemed to be onto-theology.<sup>104</sup>

The presence of onto-theology in both theology and metaphysics sets the stage for serious criticisms, most famous of which was Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead." For Nietzsche, a "god" who merely represented "morality" and values is only vital and relevant as long as that "god" was determined to be the source of that morality. However, Nietzsche

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103. Anselm Kyongsuk Min, "Towards a Dialectic of Truth: Contemporary Reflections on Hegel's Conception of Truth," in *Truth: Interdisciplinary Dialogues in a Pluralist Age*, ed. Christine Helmer, Kristin de Troyer and Katie Goetz (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 14.

104. Marion, *God without Being*, 64.



criticizes and rejects “the logic and rationality attributed to the divine Word.” Dirk de Schutter further comments that, for Nietzsche, “the true, the logical, the comprehensible and the spiritual have [not] been realized,” as was thought in the onto-theology Hegel proposed. Rather, Schutter further says of Nietzsche, meaningless nonsense, the absurdity of humankind’s efforts, the insolence of neglect, the inanity of endeavor, and the irrationality of God’s presence and absence has been realized, and, apparently, this God has “hardly been able to remedy this.”<sup>105</sup> Nietzsche’s assertion of the result of the unholy alliance between philosophy, and the theological concept of God is summed up in the oft-quoted, “Whither is God? [...] I shall tell you. We have killed him—you and I.”<sup>106</sup> Humanity and human society traversed from being creatures created by God, to co-creators of their world, and finally have elevated themselves to the level of sole creator, all through the realm of reason.<sup>107</sup> To forestall the nihilism from the void left by the death of God, Nietzsche proposes that the fear of this new space be faced head on, and embraced as an opportunity for the creation of “new gods.”

And yet, paradoxically, Heidegger, who refers to Nietzsche as “the last metaphysician,” observes that Nietzsche’s call for the creation of “new gods” is the perpetuation of the very onto-theology that Nietzsche originally sought to criticize. Heidegger concludes that Nietzsche’s metaphysics “is nihilism proper.” In making this conclusion, Heidegger surmises that it is Nietzsche’s proposition within his metaphysical theory of nihilism to completely “revalue all previous values” and devalue all of what are considered to be the highest values, which reveals

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105. Dirk de Schutter, “Zarathustra’s Yes and Woe: Nietzsche, Celan, and Eckhart on the Death of God,” in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* ed. Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 125

106. Frederick Nietzsche, “The Gay Science,” in *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian, 1989), 126.

107. Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate, “Echoes of an Embarrassment: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology-An Introduction,” in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, ed. Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 33.

his metaphysics to be based on the “principle of valuation” itself. Thus, as Heidegger asserts, “Nietzsche experiences the historical movement of nihilism as a history of devaluation of the highest values hitherto,” and “represents overcoming as revaluation and carries it through, not only in a new valuation but also in such a way that he experiences will to power as the principle of the new—and ultimately of all—valuation.”<sup>108</sup>

Although Nietzsche sought to overcome the lack of life, lack of vitality, and lack of purpose that is thought to follow the emptiness of true nihilism, he himself could not escape the trap of onto-theology even through posing the death of God. Nietzsche himself was caught in its trap because of “value thinking in terms of will to power.”<sup>109</sup> For Nietzsche, the highest will to power was “to stamp Becoming with the character of Being,” with Becoming being defined as “inventing, willing, self-denying, self-overcoming: no subject but an action, it places things, it is creative, no ‘cause and effects.’”<sup>110</sup> Value thinking in terms of will to power continues to acknowledge beings as such. Yet, as Heidegger asserts, “by tying itself to an interpretation of Being as value, [Nietzsche’s metaphysics] simultaneously binds itself to the impossibility of even casting an inquiring glance at Being as Being.”<sup>111</sup> For Heidegger, Marion, and others who recognize metaphysics as onto-theology, this is crux of the matter.

Metaphysics, as well as theology, theorize based on understandings of ontology, or beings as beings. As Heidegger observes, “‘ontology’ defines the being as such with respect to its *essentia*.”<sup>112</sup> It is within this context that questions can be asked and answers sought as to

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108. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 3, *The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 202-03.

109. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 3:202.

110. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vols. 1-2 (Digireads.com Publishing, 2010), 236 (no. 617).

111. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 3:203.

112. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 3:210.

what serves as the ultimate essence of beings, or in other words, the ground of beings as such. For Nietzsche's metaphysics, viewed through the lens of ontology, this ultimate essence is the will to power. For the more classical understandings of metaphysical structure, such as put forth by Descartes, the ultimate essence is the *causa sui*. Yet regardless of the particular metaphysical or theological system, traditionally the concept of the primordial Being of beings has not been contemplated.

Marion notes that the history of ontology and metaphysics should be rewritten as the history of the forgetting of Being, and as an unthought history of Being.<sup>113</sup> Heidegger states it well: "if metaphysics as such does not think Being itself because it thinks Being in the sense of being as such, ontology and theology, on the basis of their mutual dependence on each other, both must leave Being itself unthought."<sup>114</sup> Therefore, in the same way that Nietzsche proposes that Christianity's overreliance on the "God of morality" caused God to be put to death, metaphysics is dealt a death sentence because of its inability to escape onto-theology and contemplate the ontological difference between being as essence and the primordial Being as such. Metaphysics, in its narrowness, seeks predication, and as such, can only look to express itself in a regionalized manner. Being as such, in its openness, always remains an analytic of interrogation and a representation of the dynamics of contextual relationality.

The pathway and evolution of phenomenology has possibilities for analysis that, unlike metaphysics, does not seek predication. Husserl, phenomenology's progenitor, proposed a method of philosophical inquiry that posits reality as consisting of the first-person intention and perception of phenomena, and the meaning of that phenomena, in human consciousness.

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113. Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 108.

114. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 3:210.

However, Husserl's interpretation of phenomenology sought to determine the objective, ideal meanings of objects and events. Husserl believed in a transcendental realism dependent on the concept of a "pure Ego," and the ability of that Ego to assess the essence of the phenomena.<sup>115</sup> This is neither the conception of phenomenology, nor the interpretation of phenomena, that Marion and BAP seek to address the problem of onto-theology. The phenomenological evolution spurred by Heidegger also proves too constraining. Unlike Husserl, Heidegger maintains no transcendental realism; to the contrary, Heidegger postulates the inability to interrogate being prior to the contextualized interrogation of the Being of beings through the lens of *Dasein*. While Heidegger's phenomenology reflects the movement away from essentialism, neither Marion nor BAP desire the phenomenological constraints relegated to the intentions and perceptions of *Dasein*.

The result of what Marion understands as theology is the ultimate in the distortion and devaluation of the divine. The very concept of divinity suggests that humanity cannot even begin to fathom that deity by any of the means and resources available to them. Yet, rather than recognizing these human limitations, humanity attempts to take what little they can fathom and idolizes it. This idol, rather than encapsulating the universalized God, is instead confined to a particular, truncated, human preconception. Marion observes that when the concept of divine is thought to have been captured, it is defined by the naming of this concept as God. In Heideggerian language, Marion asserts that the defined concept takes up the essential characteristics of the "aesthetic idol" because it apprehends the divine on the basis of *Dasein*, and "measures the divine as a function of [*Dasein*]." As a result, the limits on the experience of

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115. Christian Beyer, "Edmund Husserl," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/husserl/>.

God due to the finitude of *Dasein* allow *Dasein* to “freeze the divine in a concept, [e.g.] an invisible mirror.”<sup>116</sup>

Once again referencing Heidegger, this measuring of the divine as a function of *Dasein* is an example of the type of ontology that takes place in propositional metaphysics and theology throughout history. Yet Heidegger’s phenomenology differs radically from propositional metaphysics in that, rather than merely focusing on objects in their essence as a function of beings in their essence, Heidegger asserts that recognizing that *Dasein* can self-interpret its actions and behaviors as a way of being that is even more elemental.<sup>117</sup> This self-interpretation of a way of being is called “existence,” and existence precedes essence. More importantly, within Heidegger’s paradigm, existence as such is relegated only to self-interpreting *Dasein*; and as a result, God, and other objects have no meaning regarding the term “existence.”<sup>118</sup> It is with this paradigm that Heidegger is able to escape the trap of onto-theology by switching from metaphysical study to phenomenological examination. Hubert Dreyfus observes that Heidegger substitutes “epistemological questions concerning the relation of the knower and the known,” with “ontological questions concerning what sort of beings we are and how our being is bound up with the intelligibility of the world,” thus breaking away from both Husserl and the Cartesian tradition.<sup>119</sup> Again, there is no room for the contemplation of any “ground” or “foundation” with the object of interrogation being ontological based in the way of being of *Dasein*. As Dreyfus

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116. Marion, *God without Being*, 42-45.

117. Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being in the World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 14-15.

118. *Ibid.*, 15.

119. Dreyfus, *Being in the World*, 3.

further writes, “Our practices can never be grounded in human nature, or God’s will, or the structure of rationality”.<sup>120</sup>

Marion believes that phenomenology can be used to escape the entanglements of propositional metaphysics. However, much like Heidegger himself, Marion is not willing to have “God” encompassed under the realm of beings, existence, and Being as such. Marion asks, “What does it mean to exist?” In conjunction with the answer to that question, Marion further asks “Is this term suitable to something like ‘God’?” Referencing Heidegger, Marion insists that before coming to even the hypothesis of God that “one must pass through the dazzling but trying multiplicity of the gods.” Even after that, says Marion, one must go further through the “miraculous simplicity of the divine and of the holy in order to finally end at the very question of Being.”<sup>121</sup> Ultimately, Marion questions and rejects the idea of divinity that can be encompassed within the realm of Heidegger’s phenomenological paradigm of Being. In seeking that Divine which would both defy and dwarf every thought, impression, or expression, no structure involving and containing beings would be able to circumscribe it. Marion thus concludes that “[o]ntological difference itself, and hence also Being, become too limited [...] to pretend to offer the dimension,” and even less, the ‘divine abode’ where God would become thinkable”.<sup>122</sup>

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120. Ibid., 37.

121. Marion, *God without Being*, 41. In this assertion, Marion interrogates the ability to even “locate God” within the realm of Being. Marion is specifically making reference here, in using the specific wording of “multiplicity of gods” and “the holy,” to language utilized by Heidegger in addressing the divine. In Heidegger’s work, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, Heidegger makes reference to “the gods,” not in the sense of whether or not there is pluralistic pantheon of deities, but rather “as an allusion to undecidability of the being of the gods, whether of one single god, or of many gods.” Heidegger goes further to assert famously “whether anything at all like being dare be attributed to gods without destroying everything that is divine”. Regarding “the holy,” reference here is being made to Heidegger and his understanding of the place of language and the realm of the poet and the poetic in his later writings. Julian Young asserts that, for Heidegger, “the Holy is the poetic, in the sense of that which is to be poeticized,” and that “it is the poetic and it alone, which grants the possibility of human ‘dwelling,’” and not just merely human existence. For Heidegger, this human place of dwelling can only occur in a sacred place, a place where the world discloses itself as holy, a “place of poets.”

122. Marion, *God without Being*, 45.

Unwilling to accept the failures posed by the onto-theology of metaphysics and theology, and dissatisfied with the phenomenological limitations encompassed in Heidegger's paradigm of the primordial Being of beings, Marion moves forward with his own phenomenological developments in an attempt to address the temporal experience of the divine. Two such distinctives, namely the idol and the icon, crucially address the crux of the metaphysical issue Marion seeks to mitigate. Through Marion's identification of and emphasis upon the idol, he calls attention to and further defines the downfall of onto-theology within the strict paradigm of metaphysics while placing it within the context of phenomenology. Phenomenologically, an idol involves an understanding of the divine that has been so truncated and distorted that the phenomenon is rendered unacceptable, inaccurate and essentially marginalized. The idol is nothing more than a replication of what we think to be our better selves. With the concept of the icon, however, there is a proper understanding that our finite state can only approach a partial understanding of the divine through our experience of the icon. The icon points to the divine. Through our recognition of the icon, we admit to not fully understanding our overwhelming personal experience of the phenomenon. Instead, we are left depending on experiences in which we can participate in hopes of using the icon—as well as the experiences of others—to attain meaningful, albeit limited knowledge of the divine.

### **The Idol and the Icon**

For Marion, idol and icon are phenomena.<sup>123</sup> However, the distinguishing characteristic of these two phenomena, as they relate to what Marion understands as humanity's perception of

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123. The concepts of idol and icon form the foundation of Marion's understanding and application of apophasis. Marion's apophasis is distinctly designed to prevent idolatry. Therefore, apophasis, for Marion, focuses directly on identifying and preventing the normalization of the truncated, incomplete, and inferior apprehension of revelatory saturated phenomena. Marion wants to expose this deprecated perception for the idolatry that it is. Marion's approach is different from the thought process of Derrida. Derrida addresses the question of the name of God from

the visibility of the divine, is that they are competing phenomena. In other words, they serve as different means by which the divine may be made visible to humanity's perceptions. For Marion, the idol serves as "what is" conceived and venerated as an icon of true divinity. However, in contrast to the idol, which immediately seems to be inherently flawed, an icon is in actuality "what should be" conceived and venerated as the representation of the divine.<sup>124</sup>

The icon differentiates itself from the idol in that it abandons trying to conceive and comprehend the incomprehensible. Instead, it is the invisible within the visible, such that the visible does not seek to determine the essence of the invisible, but rather its intention is toward the determination of the invisible. This distinction is important because it is an immediate reflection of the shift of focus away from the metaphysical concept of "essence." The icon is an appearance, and allows itself to be measured by the "excessiveness of the invisible" and its infinite depth.<sup>125</sup> The icon points to the invisible, but yet, as a representation of the invisible, never allows itself to be conceived as the full representation or ground of the invisible as such, since the invisible is unintelligible and totally overwhelming to the vision of humanity. There is a distance maintained between the visible and the invisible, such that the invisible remains distinct

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the standpoint of what is being done when one calls God. In other words, naming and calling God in the context of Derrida's querying involves the possibility that the word is empty of reality and that there is no one to call upon. It is, by default, an act of faith; for Derrida, if there was certainty regarding the One being called, there would cease to be a reason to call. John D. Caputo, Kevin Hart, and Yvonne Sherwood, "Epoche and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2005), 36-38.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20181025194754/https://books.google.com/books?id=9MD3qFaGYKcC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false> Marion, on the other hand, starts at the point of the possibility of the self-revelation of the Saturated Phenomenon. One does not call to the divine; one is called. It is not dearth, but excess, that impedes knowledge and frustrates adequation. As a result, given this self-revelation, Marion's apophatic task is to guard against the idolatry of thinking one fully perceives the One who calls. Jean-Luc Marion, "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology,'" in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 38-40.

[https://web.archive.org/web/20181025202515/https://books.google.com/books/about/God\\_the\\_Gift\\_and\\_Postmodernism.html?id=70wzBXKE85cC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp\\_read\\_button#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://web.archive.org/web/20181025202515/https://books.google.com/books/about/God_the_Gift_and_Postmodernism.html?id=70wzBXKE85cC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false)

124. Marion, *God without Being*, 7-8.

125. *Ibid.*, 17.



and ineffable, but to some lower extent visible in the only means by which it can possibly be represented through the icon. Marion's ultimate example of the icon comes theologically in and through the person and example of the Christ, as he makes reference to the Father. However, the Father can only be seen in the Son, such that it is the Son as icon that is to be looked to for any conception and limited interpretation of the Father.<sup>126</sup>

Marion's understanding of the idol seems to contradict that which he proposes the icon to be. The idol stands as an attempt by humanity to comprehend the incomprehensible. Now, at this particular juncture, icon and idol represent the experience of the visible that attempts to perceive that which is too excessive, infinite, and overwhelming to truly behold. However, the idol, in representation of humanity's perception of the divine, becomes what humans determine to be the actual essence of the divinity. In other words, upon gazing at the divine, one's gaze, while intending on the divine, is thus overwhelmed by the divine such that one's gaze cannot help but stop and rest upon what she will make her idol. The idol represents what her vision can no longer pass beyond in its gaze upon the invisible. The determination of what the gaze has rested upon as the actual essence of the divinity is additionally problematic because the person's gaze was not even the actual sighting of the visible; for the idol itself ultimately acts as a mirror which reflects, in obscurity, "the image of the gaze's aim and the scope of that aim." The gaze is ultimately saturated by the perceived visibility of the idol and bedazzled by it.<sup>127</sup>

Ultimately, the consequential predicament of the idol is that "in the idol, the divine actually comes into the visibility for which human gazes watch."<sup>128</sup> Crucially, however, this perceived visibility is, at absolute best, a denigrated, demeaned, and corrupted image of what is

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126. Ibid., 22-23.

127. Marion, *God without Being*, 10-12.

128. Ibid., 13-14.

truly incomprehensible. By definition, what is truly incomprehensible can never be fully grasped by finite and fallible humanity. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, the extremely inferior and severely limited perception of this image—the idol—is thought to be the very essence of the divine. This deduction can hardly be overstated because it greatly influences the understanding of the divine in terms of theology, and the divine in terms of philosophy as it pertains to phenomenology, ontology, and metaphysics. In the first chapter, I discussed idolatry as occurring when our ideologies are seen to encompass the full essence of either what reality is, or what reality should be. Regarding the concept of God, idolatry involves humans assuming that they are seeing God, when what they are really seeing is the God of their own creation. I believe that Pinn's AANHT is idolatrous. Pinn has determined in his ideology that God does not, and should not, exist. He cannot see this viewpoint in any other way. God is held completely captive by Pinn's imagination, despite the fact that Pinn professes not to believe in God. Controlling God's negative shadow is what Pinn is trying to control by almost any means necessary. For Pinn, God has been deemed detrimental, and Pinn sees this declaration as permanent, ultimate, Absolute Truth. Given that Pinn sees himself as the holder of truth, even if he thinks he is open to other points of view, it is clear that no position regarding God is legitimized by Pinn unless you discuss the concept of God with him on his own terms.

Now that we know Marion's definition of idolatry, we can examine how he postulates the possibility of saturated phenomena. With an idol, one takes one's perception to be the whole truth of the divine. However, in the next section I will discuss that, for Marion, by the very definition of the total givenness of self-revealed saturated phenomena, there is no possibility to take in what is being given. The idea of perceiving the essence of what saturates is completely blown away, and all that can be left is the indescribable, ineffable icon which merely points to

the phenomena that saturates. In other words, any attempts to establish an idol cannot exist for truly saturated phenomena. Only this type of phenomena—and in particular to Marion's paradigm, only the fully saturating Saturated Phenomenon par excellence—allows for the possibility of ineffable, divine self-revelation.

### **Saturated Phenomena**

No longer restricted to the realm of the Being of beings, Marion utilizes a phenomenological basis of religion to postulate saturated phenomena as a means for allowing the possibility of revelation. First, regarding the idea of a saturated phenomenon, Marion lays the foundation for an understanding of saturation by referring to a “common definition of the phenomenon” in relation to the ideas of Kant and Husserl. According to Marion, “[t]he common definition of the phenomenon is a definition that puts two terms (intuition and concept/signification) into relation with only two forms of their possible relationship (absence of intuition and adequation), ignoring the third (surplus of intuition and/or lack of signification).” From this understanding, Marion asks the following question: “To the phenomenon characterized most often by lack or poverty of intuition (a deception of the intentional aim)” or the phenomenon characterized by the mere “equality of intuition and intention,” why could there not be “the possibility of a phenomenon where intuition would give more, indeed immeasurably more, than the intention would have even aimed at or foreseen?”<sup>129</sup> For the purposes of introducing the idea of saturated phenomenon through the ideas of the absence of intuition (lack/poverty of intuition) and adequation (equality of intention and intuition), it will be most

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129. Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 197.

efficient to undertake an understanding of these ideas in a conversation that also discusses the degree of givenness.

When discussing phenomena in the terminology of the absence of intuition as understood through the lens of the degree of givenness, the absence of intuition refers to the situation of phenomena that is poor in intuition. This type of phenomena is descriptive of only a “formal intuition in mathematics or a categorical intuition in logic.” This type of phenomena does not “give (itself), or only a little” such that there is no “real nor individual intuition.” No accomplished phenomenality occurs at this level, in that such “poor phenomena no longer admits anything ‘that experience might render uncertain’ ” In the terminology of intuition as it pertains to concept, poor phenomena involve an intuition which is less than a given concept, such that this type of phenomena (if it can even truly qualify as phenomena) is an abstraction that guarantees certainty, and allows for objectification.<sup>130</sup>

On the other hand, adequation as viewed under the lens of givenness, and utilizing the terminology of givenness, involves the extent of intuitive fulfillment. In this situation, the concept, which is aimed at by intention, is manifest to the extent that it receives intuitive fulfillment. Thus, for adequation, the intuition is equal to the intention, at least in principle, even though the intention, like its concept, “remains partially unconfirmed by intuition, thus not perfectly given.”<sup>131</sup> In further explicating this situation, which Marion refers to as common phenomena, he notes that “a weak intuitive confirmation of the concept [is] reasonably [sufficient] to give the corresponding phenomenon—provided it is confirmed by being repeated regularly.” In stipulating that the concept is confirmed despite a weak intuitive confirmation,

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130. Marion, *Being Given*, 222.

131. Ibid.

Marion emphasizes that “the deficit of intuition secures the concept’s mastery over the entire process of manifestation, thereby maintaining an abstraction,” or “attaining a degree of certainty comparably to that of poor phenomena.”<sup>132</sup>

To review, the absence of intuition results in the language of givenness in what Marion calls poor phenomena; the intuition of the phenomena is less than the concept. With adequation, the intuition is equal to the intention, and the concept, though not perfectly confirmed, is reasonably sufficient to still provide mastery over the manifestation of the phenomena. In both of these circumstances, what is given in the phenomena can be conceptually received and perceived by the one to whom the phenomena occurs with a reasonable degree of certainty. With these understandings established, Marion proposes that in certain cases, there could be a phenomenon which is both saturated in intuition, and whose intention “would give more, indeed immeasurably more, than the intention would ever have aimed at or foreseen.”<sup>133</sup> It is this type of phenomenon that Marion proposes might be a phenomenon representative of a revelation of the Divine. Marion goes on to extend the concept of saturated phenomena to the Divine. Marion’s apophatic theology relies on his concept of saturated phenomenon.

Marion describes the saturated phenomenon as that which is invisible according to quantity, unbearable according to quality, absolute according to relation, and *irregardable* according to modality. In describing the saturated phenomenon as invisible regarding quantity, Marion asserts that a saturated phenomenon has an unforeseeable character for which aim is not possible. In this way, the one to whom the phenomenon is given has no control in terms of an aim towards the phenomenon. The one to whom the phenomenon is given is solely in the

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132. Ibid., 223.

133. Marion, *Being Given*, 197.

position to receive the phenomenon. In terms of quality, the saturated phenomenon cannot be borne by the one to whom the phenomenon is given. In other words, the one to whom the phenomenon is given is bedazzled by the phenomenon, because the gaze of the one who receives the phenomenon is overwhelmed by what the one who is gazing at it sees. Regarding its relation being absolute, this characteristic simply means that the phenomenon “evades any analogy of experience,” such that objectification and comprehension are not possible.<sup>134</sup> In making this observation, Marion asserts that this dearth of analogy is a result of the overflow of the phenomenon past any horizons, such that the phenomenon is completely unconditioned.<sup>135</sup>

Finally, saturated phenomena are *irregardable* according to modality. This means that a phenomenon “refuses to let itself be regarded as an object precisely because it appears with a multiple and indescribable excess that annuls all effort at constitution,” such that it must be determined as a “non-objectifiable phenomenon.”<sup>136</sup> The phenomenon must be considered to be a counter-experience, which, rather than being equivalent to a “non-experience,” is the experience of a phenomenon that is “neither regardable, nor guarded according to objectness,” and as such, “resists the conditions of objectification.”<sup>137</sup> In summary, saturated phenomena are phenomena that are to be received by the one experiencing the phenomenon as that phenomenon gives itself. The phenomenon further overwhelms the one receiving it by bedazzling the receiver’s gaze such that the experience is beyond all analogy of other experiences, beyond all objectifications, and beyond all attempts at reconstitution.

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134. Ibid., 206.

135. Marion, *Being Given*, 211-12.

136. Ibid., 213.

137. Ibid., 215.

While saturated phenomena introduce the possibility of revelation, such that a saturated phenomenon possesses invisibility regarding aim, inability to be borne, the characteristic of evading all analogies, and the requirement of being determined as non-objectifiable phenomena, Marion recognizes that a saturated phenomenon that attempts to reflect the lived experience of God must actually be a saturation of saturation. This saturation “to the second degree” must result in a phenomenology that redefines its own limits so that it may approach a revelation of God, if at all possible.<sup>138</sup> For Marion, the phenomenon of revelation must be “freed” from all determinations, whether metaphysical or phenomenological, positive or negative. The phenomenon of revelation does not have to choose between kataphasis or apophasis; according to Marion, all things are used to “push to its end the phenomenality of what shows itself only insofar as it gives itself.”<sup>139</sup>

Finally, Marion sets the stage further for his explication of the unnamable and his apophatic stance when he discusses the point at which phenomenology breaks with metaphysics. Phenomenology breaks with metaphysics at the point in which phenomenology thinks the phenomenon neither as that which is in the horizon of objectness and therefore not an object, nor as a being, in that it is not conditioned within the horizon of Being. This break with metaphysics provides the opportunity for phenomenology to embrace the idea of saturated phenomena. Through this opportunity, phenomenology has the possibility to speak to the idea of revelation, such that language, to the extent possible, might attempt to address the unconditioned, the non-objectifiable, and the phenomenon which saturates beyond all conception.<sup>140</sup>

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138. Ibid., 242.

139. Marion, *Being Given*, 245.

140. Ibid., 320-21.

## **Apophatic Phenomenology and De-nomination**

So how does Marion speak of the One who is beyond every possible concept, object, structure and language which humanity can construct? Marion strives to operate in a manner consistent with the belief that language and structures fall short of addressing the unnameable. Marion rejects the onto-theology of metaphysics and philosophically enmeshed theology because these structures lend themselves to creating idols of the unnameable by regionalizing the concept of God within the confines of metaphysical, ontological structures. Thus, Marion uses phenomenology and the idea of saturated phenomena as a paradigm within which the possibility for phenomenological revelation can exist. Having chosen the paradigm in which he operates, Marion engages in discourse regarding the unnameable.

As mentioned previously, Marion rejects structures that objectify God, regionalize God, and subsume God within the realms of metaphysics, theology, and Heidegger's understanding of beings and the Being of beings. On the other hand, Marion prefers that his methods of attempting to speak of the unnameable not be categorized as negative theology. To escape the category of negative theology Marion employs a "formula" of apophasis, distinguishing two methods. In part, Marion relies upon the actions taken by some of the church fathers as they wrestled regarding the naming of God, and the language used to communicate their human understanding of God. Marion distinguishes the apophatic methodology from his understanding of negative theology, as defined by Derrida in his earlier writings. Marion notes, per the understanding of Derrida, that negative theology is "always occupied with letting a superessential reality go beyond finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence." Derrida goes further in his definition to assert that negative theology reminds us that "if we deny the predicate existence



of God, it is in order to recognize by God a superior, inconceivable and ineffable mode of being.”<sup>141</sup>

Utilizing Derrida’s assessment of negative theology, Marion recognizes that negative theology attempts to acknowledge that God cannot be captured in finite categories, and as such these finite categories cannot adequately express concepts of existence and essence regarding God. Negative theology answers the limitations of humanity regarding language about God by recognizing God through a negation of God. Negative theology recognizes that God exceeds any and all types of descriptions and conceptions. Marion agrees with this premise that is associated with negative theology - that God outstrips any conceivable thoughts we might have about God. For Marion, the “negation” associated with negative theology actually “prevails over affirmation,” to the extent that affirmation and negation are one’s only choices. Marion asserts that “affirmation can give one the feeling of attaining the unattainable essence of God,” as opposed to negation, which “never claims as much, but remains valid by denying the most remote determination of the divine.”<sup>142</sup>

Despite the benefit afforded negative theology and negation in not even attempting to describe the indescribable, negative theology and negation are still problematic as a whole in regard to the divine. According to Marion, negation is “an example of denegation.” In referencing denegation, Marion asserts that negation causes negative theologians to fall into the trap of talking about God, even though they insist that it is not appropriate to actually speak about God due to the limitations of human knowledge, comprehension, and language.<sup>143</sup>

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141. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.

142. Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 138.

143. Marion, *In Excess*, 131.

Denegation also proves to be problematic as it relates to *differance*, deconstruction, and the metaphysics of presence.

In *Phenomenology and the Metaphysics of Presence*, Wolfgang Walter Fuchs discusses the idea of how Husserl makes reference to the metaphysics of presence. Fuch observes that “it is characteristic of the attempt to adhere to the metaphysics of presence that there is an effort to reduce absence to being a converted mode of presence, or at least having presence be more primordial than absence.”<sup>144</sup> In making reference to the ideas of presence and absence, Fuch initially asserts that “presence and absence are co-constitutive of the real, of being.” He further notes that the “intuition of the living presence is not given without the intuition of absence at the same moment.”<sup>145</sup> However, with the metaphysics of presence, a hierarchy is established, such that one attribute is intentionally elevated above another. Fuch states that the metaphysics of presence requires “being in the mode of presence be a privileged notion.” Derrida agrees with this assessment, noting that metaphysics is a “science of presence,” such that “all metaphysics privileges presence, or that which is.”<sup>146</sup> Derrida seeks to subvert this type of binary through the strategy of deconstruction using the concept of *differance*. Derrida’s deconstruction methodology is relevant here because Marion contends that even Derrida’s deconstruction and use of *differance* is a denegation, as is the rest of negative theology,

Derrida’s concept of *differance* references that which cannot be exposed, in the context that “one can expose only that which at a certain moment can become present, manifest, that

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144. Wolfgang Walter Fuch, *Phenomenology and the Metaphysics of Presence: An Essay in the Philosophy of Edmund Husserl* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 74.

145. Fuch, *Phenomenology and the Metaphysics of Presence*, 70.

146. Jack Reynolds, ‘Jacques Derrida,’ *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180115191751/http://www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/>.

which can be shown, presented as something present.”<sup>147</sup> To carry this understanding further, Derrida contrasts *differance* with that which is “a being present in its truth, in the truth of a present, or the presence of the present.”<sup>148</sup> For Derrida, *differance* is never present, for “[i]n every exposition it would be exposed to disappearing as disappearance,” and it would risk appearing” in its disappearance. More directly, Derrida asserts that “*differance is not*” for it “does not exist,” and is “not a present being in any form.” *Differance* has no essence or existence, it is not theological, and it not reducible to ontotheological reappropriation. As such, by Derrida’s rather complex definition, *differance* cannot be caught up in the metaphysics of presence. Instead, *differance* is “the very opening of the space in which onto-theology—philosophy—produces its system and its history; it includes onto-theology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return.” While Derrida admits that the language he is forced to use regarding *differance* will cause it to sound almost exactly like negative theology, he insists that *differance* is distinguished from negative theology in that *differance* “derives from no category of being, whether present or absent.”<sup>149</sup> Thus, as Marion notes, Derrida is able to assert that *differance* alone is able to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence without reinforcing and reinscribing the concept of presence.

Marion, however, disagrees with Derrida’s indictment of negative theology, and his assertion that *differance* alone is able to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence. Marion states that Derrida is attempting to deconstruct what is already “an explicit denegation of presence,” such that Derrida is left simply to “deconstructing a quasi-deconstruction.” Marion sees in Derrida’s criticism of negative theology the theory of one denegation, Derrida’s *differance*,

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147. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 5-6.

148. Ibid.

149. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 6.

defending itself from its rival, negative theology. Marion believes that Derrida's *differance*, as it is used to deconstruct negative theology, merely serves to "stigmatize" negative theology.

Derrida accuses negative theology of failing "to think God outside of presence and to free itself from the metaphysics of presence;" and yet, per Marion, Derrida's own deconstructive theory claims to "put us in the presence of God in the very degree to which it denies all presence."<sup>150</sup>

Marion seems to be in the minority in this particular assessment of Derrida and *differance*. Luke Ferretter asserts that Mark Taylor, John Caputo, and Paul Ricoeur all agree in denying that deconstruction bears any relation with negative theology. Per Ferretter, Ricoeur asserts that, if negative theology is the theology of absence, "it cannot be compared to the deconstruction of the opposition between presence and absence."<sup>151</sup> For Taylor and Caputo, the issue is that negative theology has as its object a supreme being, while deconstruction does not involve beings at all. Ferretter himself agrees with Marion, asserting that, "as a discourse of the other, deconstruction has a comparable object and methods of signifying that object to those of negative theology. Akin to Marion, Ferretter extensively references Pseudo-Dionysius in his arguments."<sup>152</sup>

Having assessed the judgment of denegation to both negative theology and Derrida's *differance* as what prevents them from adequately addressing the incomprehensible, ineffable, and unnameable God, Marion embarks upon an exposition of a third way in which to respond to the indescribably inexpressible. Marion labels this alternate way "de-nomination," and the process resembles the path taken by pseudo-Dionysius, whom Marion specifically refers to as

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150. Marion, *In Excess*, 132.

151. Marion, *In Excess*, 132.

152. Luke Ferretter, "How to Avoid Speaking of the Other: Derrida, Dionysius and the Problematic of Negative Theology," *Paragraph* 24, no. 1 (2001): 50.

Denys. Marion notes that Denys never used just one means or step in arriving at his understanding of the names of God. In other words, Denys did not simply use a kataphatic—positive—theology, nor did he simply use a form of negative theology. In fact, his resulting method of apophatism was derived only through the process that utilized both kataphatic and negative theology; neither to the exclusion of the other. Marion upholds Denys’s reasoning - that the purpose is to “aim at what remains ‘above every negation and affirmation’” when contemplating the name of the divine. This reasoning is supportive of the ultimate conclusion that “there is never any proper or appropriate name” when attempting to speak about God.<sup>153</sup>

Marion describes Denys’s process as first starting with the need to “impose and affirm all theses of beings insofar as it is the cause of all.”<sup>154</sup> This assessment seems to be supported by *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which speaks of Dionysius as recognizing the names used by “angels or intelligible minds,” in recognition of exemplary goodness, or being, or life, or other Neoplatonic categories as a type of “intelligible name.” For Dionysius, God transcends the proper meaning of these names, such that God is “over-being,” or “over-intellect.”<sup>155</sup> Marion describes the next step of Denys’s process as a radical negation of that which has just been positively affirmed. Again, this seems to correspond to Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*. Dionysius asserts that “any and all of the divine names must be negated, beginning with those of the symbolic theology, continuing with the intelligible names, and concluding with the theological representations.”<sup>156</sup> Citing *Mystical Theology*, Marion also notes that it was important to Denys that the negation not be taken as privation. Instead, we must understand that affirmations are the

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153. Ibid., 139.

154. Ferretter, “How to Avoid Speaking of the Other,” 135.

155. Kevin Corrigan and L. Michael Harrington, “Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2015, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite/>.

156. Ibid.

contrary of the negations. Even further, the One who cannot adequately be named surpasses all affirmations and their corresponding negations. As a result, Denys's methodology suggests that there must be an interplay of affirmation and negation; leading to a third way which, per Marion, surpasses even the dualities of true and false.

Marion expresses major the tenets of this third way for Denys as the means by which two values of truth—affirmation and negation—combine to totally transgress the incomplete and inaccurate discourse of metaphysics.<sup>157</sup> This third way turns the activity of attempting to name the unnameable from mere predication to practical pragmatism. For Marion, Denys's process results in an apophatism whose sole purpose is to direct one towards the unnameable, as opposed to predication, or its opposite—silence. Marion specifically utilizes this third way so that his phenomenological theology no longer pertains to predicating God, but rather, denominating God. In this way, Marion seems to pursue the traditional, mystical understanding of *via eminentiae*, thus saving the eminence of God. *Via eminentiae* stands so radically other and hyperbolic that it tears discourse away from predication altogether, and thus away from the alternative of truth or falsity.<sup>158</sup>

Marion's De-nomination involves a double negation of sorts. It involves a "twofold function of saying [...] and undoing this saying of the name." For example, speaking "God" as superessential, in what is seemingly solely an affirmation, but instead is both an affirmation and a negation such that "what seems to lack negation is strongly negative in meaning." In this way, the One who is spoken of as superessential is actually declared to be "not essence, but exceeding

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157. Marion, *In Excess*, 139, 141-42.

158. Jean-Luc Marion, *The Visible and Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 104.

essence.”<sup>159</sup> Fisher provides a further explanation. For Dionysius, “God’s absolute transcendence defies even the apophatic way,” such that affirmations must be made as one denies her denials. Dionysius’s negativity is so radical and absolute that it swallows even itself.<sup>160</sup>

De-nomination is simply the only viable means of seeking what he calls the *aitia*, or *the One*. Rather than being some type of metaphysical cause, *the One* surpasses all nomination. Furthermore, *the One* is the one whom all demand when they aim at that *One* from whom they come and to whom they return. De-nomination is the means by which all discussions of essence and knowledge are contravened so that the superessential *One* can be praised as the *One* who “precedes and makes possible all essence,”<sup>161</sup> which is a step further than Derrida’s thought appropriates in his early understanding of negative theology and the superessential.

De-nomination articulates itself in the prayer of praise. In bringing up the subject of praise, through the means of prayer, Marion enters the most controversial realm of his hypotheses. Marion rightly notes that there are many negative theologians who see his “prayer of praise” as merely a “back door” by which Marion allows for the predication of God. Marion realizes that his detractors presuppose that the prayer of praise identifies the object of praise in its essence, thus immersing it once again in the murky waters of metaphysical presence. Marion recognizes that his critics who favor negative theology disagree with prayer as the medium for praise, such that prayer is not the place for any form of naming. Although these critiques sound similar, Marion sees them as distinctive, and addresses each in a separate manner.

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159. Marion, *In Excess*, 141.

160. Jeffrey Fisher, “The Theology of Dis/similarity: Negation in Pseudo-Dionysius,” *Journal of Religion* 81, no. 4 (2001): 534-35.

161. Marion, *In Excess*, 141.

In speaking to the first critique, Marion vehemently asserts that, in the prayer of praise, the proper name used “never belongs ...—by and as essence—to the one who receives it,” such that the proper name is, once again, never “a name for the essence.”<sup>162</sup> Through Marion’s reasoning, the lived experience of the proper name does not ever fix the essence of the “individual in presence,” such that, in principle, either the individual “never coincides with his presence,” or the individual’s presence exceeds its essence.”<sup>163</sup> In addressing the critique that prayer should not contain praise, Marion questions whether or not prayer can actually take place apart from a naming type of praise. Marion insists that any naming conforming to the process of denomination automatically recognizes the impropriety of the names used, such that the naming serves merely as a pragmatic means of directing one to the One who surpasses all, and thus, cannot be properly named. It is in this way that the prayer of praise transgresses the “predicative, nominative, and therefore metaphysical sense of language.”<sup>164</sup>

In addition, for Marion, the prayer of praise represents a speech act. However, this act is not a locutionary act that predicates a meaning, nor a performatory or illocutionary act, suggesting some type of conventional procedure along with the utterance of certain words in certain circumstances. Instead, praise is a perlocutionary act, such that the speech act is not required to accomplish what it says, but rather it is a speech act that “says what it says in order to have on the interlocutor an effect that is other than what it says.” It is simply an act that the “addressor” instigates or accomplishes by saying something to convince, persuade, frighten, make aware of, lead to act in a certain way, [etc.] the “addressee.”<sup>165</sup>

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162. Ibid., 142.

163. Ibid., 143.

164. Marion, *In Excess*, 145.

165. Marion, *The Visible and Revealed*, 107-10. In this context, Marion is making reference to saying the phrase, “I love you.” However, I believe that it is directly applicable to the concept of the prayer of praise, and that it is



With the existence of names used in prayer, Marion argues that he is not engaging in classical metaphysics. He recognizes that the prayer of praise can be problematic due to the limitations arising from finite language and the inability of mortals to grasp the ineffable. As a result, Marion proposes that the names utilized in the prayer of praise be understood through the traversing of the horizons of the term used, and not from that of being, even though he still realizes the virtual inability of humans to truly think in terms other than being.<sup>166</sup> In the midst of such extreme complexity in navigating the waters of the prayer of praise, and with the realization that our limitations can never be overcome, Marion finally concludes that de-nomination is a “pragmatic theology of absence,” such that the name given in the prayer of praise is given “as having no name, as not giving the essence, and having nothing but this absence to make manifest.” De-nomination is disqualified from the metaphysics of presence and the resulting onto-theology, since essence, presence, and the ground of being are omitted from the name. Ultimately, de-nomination is a “theology where hearing happens.”<sup>167</sup> Admittedly, Marion’s proposed apophatism as a whole, is controversial and open to criticism and questioning; however, his ideas regarding the “prayer of praise” are perhaps the most tenuous, at least in certain circles. While this concept might pose as a stumbling block for some, I propose that the concept of a prayer of praise as a perlocutionary act is uniquely suited to the language and acts demonstrated throughout the history of the Black church and the traditional experiences of its members.

In summary, Marion provides an environment for apophatism, phenomenologically, through the postulation of a Saturated Phenomenon Par Excellence. It is the proposed possibility

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crucially important to understand in attempting to distinguish Marion’s apophatics from negative theology.

166. Marion, *In Excess*, 147.

167. Marion, *In Excess*, 155.

of a Saturated Phenomenon Par Excellence that creates a situation that demands the absence of divine names. By employing phenomenology, Marion moves away from the more propositional discussions of the metaphysics of presence, onto-theology, and negative theology. In so doing, he is better able to postulate that, regarding the possibility of experiencing the Saturated Phenomenon Par Excellence, the inability to obtain exacting, essential knowledge and predication comes from the saturation of the intuition of the one receiving the givenness of the Phenomenon. As Marion asserts, “the excess of intuition overcomes, submerges, exceeds—in short saturates—the measure of each and every concept,” such that “[w]hat is given disqualifies”<sup>168</sup> all discourse, all objectification and all assumption of knowledge. Any claims to have comprehended the givenness of the given in total, reflects the creation of an idol on the part of the recipient, and the regionalization of the unnameable.

Marion’s goal is to prevent humans, with their limited abilities to understand, to comprehend, and to perceive God, from truncating the limitless emanation of the Divine into little more than a hyper-essentialized being. In other words, Marion wants to preserve a realization that the idea of God is beyond anything that is even remotely conceivable by humanity. Marion begins by acknowledging that, within the paradigm of ontology, the problems of onto-theology and theology render ontology, by definition, unacceptable as a paradigm that overcomes idolatry and onto-theology. Instead of ontology, Marion chooses phenomenology as his paradigm, and as such, he moves out of the realm of being versus nonbeing, and into the realm of intention and intuition. No longer having to address the limitations to the possibility of the Divine posed by ontology, Marion focuses on overcoming idolatry phenomenologically.

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168. Ibid., 159.

He begins by acknowledging that, within the paradigm of phenomenology, it is possible for someone to intend phenomena in such a way that the person believes he or she has fully received and perceived an understanding of said phenomena. However, Marion then introduces the language of the idol versus the icon, specifically as a means of distinguishing the unique issues associated with the phenomenological possibility of divine self-revelation. If people experience phenomena—even regular phenomena—with the conviction that they have, with total certainty, fully received and perceived the phenomena, then they are idolatrous by Marion's standards. There can never be total certainty with perception because it is not humanly possible to simultaneously see all sides of any respective phenomenon. As a result, any phenomenon we perceive has some level of truncation, and so much more regarding the possibility of perceiving divine self-revelation. By definition and by default, human beings cannot perceive what Marion considers to be the self-revelatory saturated phenomena; humans can only fix their gaze upon that which they want to intend. However, the idea of an icon suggests that there is a level of perception on the part of the person experiencing the saturating phenomenon; but in addition, there is the firm understanding that what one perceives is an incomplete picture of what is being revealed. The concept of an icon is meant to convey that there is more to be perceived than just what is seen, and what is seen points to that which cannot be seen.

Finally, Marion introduces, in more detail, the concept of saturated phenomena. The idea of saturated phenomena work against the concept of idols, and with the concept of icons. In other words, Marion's idea of saturated phenomena involves phenomena that are not intended by the person perceiving it. The phenomena give of themselves—what Marion refers to as the phenomena's givenness—such that all one can do is receive. However, what is given completely saturates one's ability to receive it, such that any way to understand it other than its total

ineffability is automatically idolatrous. Instead, any perceptions serve merely as icons that point to that which cannot be seen or explained. If the idea of the divine were to be entertained phenomenologically, Marion postulates that it would be a phenomenon that saturates all saturation. He makes reference to this possibility of revelation as the Saturation par Excellence.

As a result of this possibility, and because of Marion's continuing desire to avoid idolatry, he utilizes the process of de-nomination to refer to the ineffable Saturation par Excellence without metaphysical predication. His process of affirmation, negation, and the negation of the negation relieves the language of predication and the further possibility of idolatry, while still providing a means of pointing toward that which is unobjectifiable, imperceptible, and inconceivable. However, in order to more completely address overcoming idolatry in true conversation with Pinn, it will be crucial to explore the methodology of overcoming ontology and idolatry in a non-theistic, Eastern philosophical context. Looking at Masao Abe's interpretation of Zen Buddhism can provide another compelling example of addressing idolatry through apophasis.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: MASAO ABE'S NONTHEISTIC PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF ZEN BUDDHISM**

In Chapter Three, I discussed Marion's apophatic methodology that was designed to overcome idolatry phenomenologically by positing the potential for saturated phenomena—most specifically, the Saturated Phenomenon par Excellence—to reveal itself in total givenness, completely saturating and overwhelming our ability to apprehend or comprehend it. Because of finite humanity's limitations, Marion proposed a process of de-nomination that would forgo inadequate, incomplete, and idolatrous predication, settling instead for referential language that would merely point towards the potentialized Ineffable. While Marion's apophatic phenomenology theistically hypothesizes the possibility for the Divine without being idolatrous, in this chapter I discuss Masao Abe's nontheistic, philosophical interpretation of Zen Buddhism that mitigates idolatry through its dialectical overcoming of dualities using the overarching concept *sunyata*—also referred to as emptiness or nothingness. I refer to Abe's methodology for overcoming dualities as double negation. The purpose of this chapter is to lay a foundation for the use of Abe's methodology of double negation to make up the nontheistic component of my proposed Black Apophatic Phenomenology.

I begin my exploration of Abe's methodology with a brief explanation of the context of Abe's scholarship within the influence of the Kyoto School and its origins. In the brief exploration of the Kyoto School, I introduce, define, and discuss the key concept of *sunyata* and its importance to traditional Buddhism, to Abe, and to Keiji Nishitani—a leading scholar of the Kyoto School who postulates a different interpretation of *sunyata* than Abe. After discussing Abe and Nishitani's interpretations of *sunyata*, I will discuss why, for the purposes of BAP, I have

decided upon using Abe's interpretation of *sunyata*. This determination will lead me into the concluding chapter to expound in more detail about BAP, BAP's theistic and non-theistic apophatisms, and BAP's implications.

### **Sunyata and the Kyoto School**

The Kyoto School opened Japan up to Western civilization after two centuries of isolation from the rest of the world. All facets of Japanese society struggled with the influx of Western culture. Japan struggled to define and maintain its own identity while being inundated culturally, socially, economically, politically and educationally. In the realm of education, Japanese scholars sought to understand Western academics while simultaneously systemizing Eastern thought so that it would be on par with its Western academic counterparts. In the field of the philosophy of religion, this systemizing was done by scholars who were inspired by their experiences and practices of Zen and Shin (True Pure Land) traditions of Mahayana Buddhism. These scholars developed ground breaking philosophical systems based on religious Eastern thought while utilizing the same religious terminology through philosophical lenses.<sup>169</sup>

The Kyoto School set itself apart with its articulation of *sunyata*—the theological/philosophical idea of absolute nothingness. The absolutizing of nothingness sets *sunyata* apart from its nearest Western counterpart. Greek ontology is the foundation upon which much of Western philosophy is based, such that the question, “What is being?” dominates the philosophical landscape. As alluded to in the previous chapter, the Hellenization of Jewish and Christian traditions results in the adoption of God as the highest being. “God as highest being,”

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169. James W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 296-355, Kindle.

from a theological and philosophical standpoint, buckles under the weight of propositional metaphysics, the standards of rationalism and anthropomorphism, eventually devolving into Nietzsche's death of God philosophy and Heidegger's accusations of onto-theology.<sup>170</sup> In contrast, the scholars of the Kyoto School have, "What is nothingness?" as its fundamental philosophical question.<sup>171</sup> More specifically, Kyoto scholars Nishitani and Abe develop a philosophical understanding of absolute nothingness to address the pervasive nihilism of the life after the Second World War.<sup>172</sup> For Nishitani, the concept of emptiness or nothingness is a creative nothingness overcoming nihilism. For Abe, emptiness or nothingness is a positive fullness.<sup>173</sup> I explain each in greater detail in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Kitaro Nishida, the Kyoto School founder, develops the beginning thoughts of absolute nothingness as an Eastern concept relativizing the ontology of Western philosophy. Nishida's *sunyata* had as its goal negating the ontological, philosophical "self" of Western thought caught in the illusion that it could render itself as a subject objectifying objects as if it were separate from those objects and the world.<sup>174</sup> However, Nishida's unique contribution of the idea of the logic of locus will influence many of his protégées, including Nishitani, as I discuss in more detail in a subsequent section. Nishida used the idea of locus—often translated as "field"—as a means of discussing the standpoint at which the self and world are negated such that the self

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170. Nietzsche and Heidegger's critiques and the philosophical-theological conundrum of onto-theology will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

171. Bret W. Davis, "The Kyoto School," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/kyoto-school/>.

172. The Zen Buddhism espoused by scholars of the Kyoto School is not meant to be equated with traditional Zen religion because the original goal of these scholars was to articulate an Eastern philosophy rivaling its Western counterpart. As a result, I address Zen in general, as well as the specific Zen concepts discussed in this chapter as the interpretations defined and embraced by Abe and Nishitani in their articulation and interpretation of a philosophically based Zen Buddhism.

173. Gregory K. Ornatowski, "Transformations of 'Emptiness' on the Idea of Sunyata and the Thought of Abe and the Kyoto School of Philosophy," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34, no. 1 (1997): 92-115. <https://web.archive.org/web/20180115171825/http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-ADM/ornat.htm>.

174. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 1484-487, Kindle.

could find the real “truth about itself mirrored in all things just as they are.”<sup>175</sup> The locus is the point at which the activity of self-awareness takes place such that the both self and world become self-aware. It is the field of “I-in-not-I.”<sup>176</sup> It is the field of *sunyata*—absolute nothingness.

Hajime Tanabe, on the other hand, takes on the concept of absolute nothingness from Nishida, but he critiques Nishida’s philosophy as still being too ontologically based. He warned that if “absolute nothingness is made into an unchanging basis or enveloping ‘place’ of a system of reality,”<sup>177</sup> then it would end up being no different from ontological being, with its ontotheological shortcomings. To be radically different from theistic and pantheistic foundations, absolute nothingness must be thought of as absolute mediation; to be radically different from other aspects of ontological being, absolute nothingness must be thought of as absolute dialectic. Ultimately, the focus must be upon absolute negation in the form of a kenotic, self-negating absolute nothingness, such that “the absolute and the relative, nothingness and being, are interrelated with each other as indispensable elements of absolute mediation”/absolute dialectic.<sup>178</sup>

In line with his critique of Nishida, Tanabe proposes philosophy as metanoetics.<sup>179</sup> Tanabe’s metanoetics relies more heavily upon Pure Land Buddhism and Shinran, in that its focus is on a realization of the limits of reason, and the resulting mediating need for the intervention of an otherworldly power of absolute nothingness for salvation. Expressed in the

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175. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, Location 1738, Kindle.

176. Ibid., Location 1738-1753, Kindle.

177. Davis, “The Kyoto School.”

178. Ibid.

179. Hajime Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, trans. Takeuchi Yoshinori with Valdo Viglielmo and James W. Heisig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 1.  
[https://web.archive.org/web/20181026030747/https://books.google.com/books?id=pydk\\_SHoIg4C&pg=PR5&source=gbps\\_selected\\_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://web.archive.org/web/20181026030747/https://books.google.com/books?id=pydk_SHoIg4C&pg=PR5&source=gbps_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false)



Japanese term *tariki*, Tanabe's metanoetics reflected the need for "total self-surrender of the individual to the objective 'other power' of Amida Buddha to effect one's rebirth into the Pure Land."<sup>180</sup> Existential experiences of repentance, conversion, transformation, and redemption are attained through meditation—*nembutsu*—and dependence upon the other worldly power of absolute nothingness, which is symbolized by faith in the salvation of Amitabha Buddha through Pure Land Buddhism.<sup>181</sup>

Briefly mentioning Nishida and Tanabe's influence upon the concept of *sunyata* is important because it draws attention to the ways in which Nishitani and Abe's understanding of *sunyata* relate to Nishida and Tanabe. Nishitani uses Nishida's spatial metaphor to designate the "only point or 'place' at which the opposites are realized and display their true reality."<sup>182</sup> For Nishitani, Nishida's spatial metaphor serves as the fulcrum for Nishitani's use of the correlative conjunction "*soku*"—translated as "*sive*" in Nishitani's writings—which, infused between two polar opposites, suggests a constitutive and ontological prior reality.<sup>183</sup> I discuss how Nishitani uses the ideas of field and place in a subsequent section dedicated to Nishitani's specific understanding of *sunyata*. In keeping with Tanabe's critique of Nishida, Nishitani and Abe both use the absolute dialectic, but Abe especially refrains from the use of Nishida's spatial metaphor. Contrary to Tanabe's metanoetics and *tariki*, both Nishitani and Abe chose to interpret *sunyata* soteriologically through *jiriki*—the necessity of having religious and mental discipline and the moral perfection of self-effort as the prerequisite for salvation rather than dependence on grace

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180. Paul O. Ingram, "The Zen Critique of Pure Land Buddhism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41, no. 2 (1973): 184.

181. Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, 8.

182. Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), xxx.

183. *Ibid.*

or some other higher power—even though Abe remains conciliatory to his Pure Land roots. I discuss further the implications of both Nishitani and Abe’s understandings of sunyata in subsequent sections of this work. However, I begin with an overview of Masao Abe’s interpretation of Zen Buddhism.

### **Sunyata (Emptiness): Ineffability and Double-Negation in Masao Abe’s Zen**

Of most importance in exploring Masao Abe’s interpretation of Zen Buddhism as it pertains to my use of Abe’s ideas in the development of my Black Apophatic Phenomenology is the idea of Ultimate Reality.<sup>184</sup> Ultimate Reality is cosmological; it encompasses the infinite, boundless, universal dimension of all things coming to be and ceasing to be. Ultimate Reality totalizes the whole of being and non-being; it is radically dehomocentric, and it constitutes the ultimate ground for everything.<sup>185</sup> For Abe, there is no possibility of a Heideggerian ontological difference—the Being of beings differentiated from the analysis of ontic being—regarding all beings and Ultimate Reality. Zen rejects the concept of Dasein—and as a result, other Heideggerian terminology such as authenticity, *ereignis*, and being-in-the-world, also are not applicable—because, regarding Ultimate Reality, there is no dualism stratifying being and non-being.<sup>186</sup> Ultimate Reality is unsubstantial; it cannot be grasped, it cannot be defined, and it can

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184. For the purposes of this work going forward, I am using Ultimate Reality as the word that I will carry forward into the discussion of the non-theistic component of my proposed Black Apophatic Phenomenology. The idea of Ultimate Reality will have its origins here, as Abe defines it in his interpretation of Zen. However, my hope is to use the concept as a means of overcoming dualities even outside of the specific religious/philosophical realm of Zen. However, as it stands, Abe’s use of Ultimate Reality, in its unsubstantiality and ineffability, is synonymous with numerous terms including the Buddha-Nature (*Zen and Western Thought*, 36), Emptiness (*Zen and Western Thought*, 21), Impermanence (*Zen and Western Thought*, 52), and True Nirvana (*Zen and Western Thought*, 111). Unless otherwise stated, my use of Ultimate Reality in this chapter will be used in place of Abe’s use of the term Buddha-nature, in the full knowledge of its simultaneous equivalency with other cosmological terminology in Abe’s interpretation of Zen.

185. Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 36.

186. Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 46-47.

never be objectified. It is not an ontic “something” that is conditioned by attributes. Since there is no ontological difference between beings, there is no possibility for onto-theology. There is nothing outside of the concept of “all beings.”<sup>187</sup> Ultimate Reality is neither immanent nor transcendent in relation to all beings; finite beings are equal and respective in relationship to the Ultimate Reality. This Zen understanding Ultimate Reality is contrary to Spinoza’s concept of “God.” Spinoza defines God as “One Substance”—the infinite and necessary cause of the origination of all entities. As a result, Spinoza’s God is the Ultimate Reality under which all individuality is subsumed.<sup>188</sup>

However, for Abe, Ultimate Reality is the ineffable, unsubstantial, cosmological universe of all that is and is not. Furthermore, Ultimate Reality simultaneously indicates the complete mutual interpenetration of Ultimate Reality and impermanence. All beings, without exception, are impermanent. Furthermore, Ultimate Reality is “neither immanent nor transcendent in relation to all beings.” Thus, apart from a thorough realization of impermanence there is no realization of Ultimate Reality.<sup>189</sup> Ultimate Reality is not prioritized over impermanence; impermanence is not privileged over the Ultimate Reality. All the while, the impermanence of all beings remains absolutely distinct from Ultimate Reality. Paradoxically, however, impermanence and Ultimate Reality are “unseparated and inseparable, each disappearing immediately in its opposite.”<sup>190</sup> How is this possible? The potentiality lies within the idea of Becoming. Becoming cannot be reduced to either Ultimate Reality or impermanence. Rather, Becoming is cosmological, taking place in the “boundless, dimensionless-dimension of all beings,” such that

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187. Ibid.

188. Ibid., 38-40.

189. Ibid., 50-51.

190. Ibid, 54.

it is, regardless as to whether or not there is animation, or life, or death, or consciousness, or even perception. It is reversible and mutually interpenetrating; it is an open system that paradoxically unites time and eternity at each and every moment.<sup>191</sup> This is the key. Because of the dynamic nonduality of Ultimate Reality, what remains is movement. Because of the necessity of transiency, impermanence, and mutability for all things appearing and disappearing, there is not the motionlessness stasis of eternity. Ultimate Reality manifests itself specifically in the present moment, in the universality of impermanence that unites spaciality and temporality in dynamic momentary nonduality.<sup>192</sup> As Abe quotes Dogen, “flowers opening, leaves falling in themselves are suchness of their essential nature,” and “to learn, in speaking of essential nature, there is no flowing for water and no growth and perishing for trees is to learn heresy.”<sup>193</sup>

The recognition and understanding of the mutual interpenetration of Ultimate Reality and impermanence also has consequences relating to nirvana. Enlightenment is realized simultaneously with Ultimate Reality, and Ultimate Reality with enlightenment. True nirvana “is only realized here and now, at each and every moment.”<sup>194</sup> Nirvana is attained only by emancipating oneself even from nirvana as transcendence of impermanences. In other words, true nirvana is realized by a complete return from nirvana to the world of impermanence—*samsara*—through liberating oneself from both impermanence and permanence, from both *samsara*, as such, and nirvana, as such. Therefore, genuine nirvana is nothing but realization of impermanence as impermanence. Abe emphasizes not abiding in either *samsara* or nirvana. Complete no-abiding is the true nirvana in the Mahayanist sense.<sup>195</sup> This is another example of

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191. Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 52-55.

192. *Ibid.*, 62-63.

193. *Ibid.*, 52.

194. *Ibid.*, 58.

195. Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 49.

complete mutual interpenetration, this time between nirvana and samsara. How is this mutual interpenetration achieved? It is achieved through the process of double negation. I provide a step by step demonstration of Abe's methodology in the following section, while discussing no-self. I then tie the key ideas together into the concept of Emptiness.

Abe meticulously develops a process of affirmation, negation, and then a negation of that negation—i.e. double negation—in a demonstration of the concept of “no-self.” The first part of the process is differentiation and affirmation wherein a duality of subject and object is recognized, such that we are differentiating ourselves from others. Abe offers this example: we, in this first process, are able to say that “I am not you but I; you are not I but you.”<sup>196</sup> In this way, a subjective point of view results in the objectification of those seen from the outside. The subjective “I” is the basis of discrimination; and, more importantly, an “objectified” self can never be a living, truly subjective self.<sup>197</sup> In fact, taking this thought to its infinite consequence, the “I” (which Abe terms the “ego-self” as a recognition of the differentiation of the ego-self from the all other selves) objectifies everything including itself. In an inevitable querying of the ego-self of itself as to “Who am I,” there results an unending iterative regression of subsequent questioning and answering as follows: “Who am I?” Who is asking who am I?” “I am asking ‘who am I.’” “Who is the ‘I’ asking ‘who am I?’” “I am the I asking ‘who am I.’” and so forth ad infinitum.<sup>198</sup> This situation ultimately results in an ego-self that, by definition and structural makeup, is self-estranged, anxious, and cut off both from one's self and one's world.

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196. Ibid., 5.

197. Ibid., 6.

198. Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 8.

In the second step, however, the first step's process, along with all of its implications, is negated. There is a realization and acceptance of the negation of differentiation, objectification, and the duality of subject and object. Abe references this resulting status as an emptying of everything. Leaving this status in place as it currently stands would usher in nihilism; a reflection of privation as such.<sup>199</sup> However, Abe describes this second step of negation and emptying as one that does not go far enough in removing true differentiation. According to Abe, a mere negation of differentiation still points to a remaining distinction between two states. This remaining distinction between the two states is simply due to having the current status in this phase of the process in existence merely to stand against and opposed to the affirmation. Thus, there is a need for a third process to overcome this remaining distinction and to arrive at the "genuine non-differentiated sameness of Ultimate Reality."<sup>200</sup>

This third process is the negation of negation. While one might see this as merely a regular affirmation that simply restores the original state of the situation in question, Abe describes it as an affirmation in the absolute sense. With this negation of a negation, "emptiness empties itself, resulting in a non-emptiness reflecting true Fullness."<sup>201</sup> Regarding Abe's example of the ego-self, the ego-self must be negated by the no-self, and the no-self, when negated by the negation, becomes the true Self. In other words, the true Self is realized only through the total negation of the no-self, which comes from the total negation of the ego-self.<sup>202</sup> This process from ego-self to realized true Self demonstrates how the true Self cannot be obtained. There can only be an awakening, a realization, an enlightenment to the true Self that comes after the

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199. Ibid.

200. Ibid.

201. Ibid., 10.

202. Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 10.

understanding that the no-self is the nihilistic contradistinction of the ego-self which must be existentially overcome.<sup>203</sup> The first negation negates temporality, while the second negation negates non-temporality, resulting in the absolute present—a dynamic whole that goes beyond, while simultaneously encompassing, past, present and future. With the realization of the absolute present, temporality is no longer an illusion, given that the absolute present is the ground upon which everything is exactly what it is in its own individuality, as well as the ground upon which past, present, and future is based.<sup>204</sup> The negation of the negation—which is the emptiness of the negation emptying itself out—results in the crucial concept of Emptiness, or the Void. In relation to this discussion of the True Self, “emptiness is subjectively and existentially realized as ‘I’—as the true Self; in other words, the true Self is realized through the “pure activity of Emptiness forever emptying itself.”<sup>205</sup>

Abe declares that Ultimate Reality in Zen is *Sunyata*—the Emptiness which empties even emptiness, making it dynamically identical with the affirmation of affirmations. As a result, *sunyata*, which overcomes all dualities and as such is true Emptiness, is simultaneously dialectally one with true Fullness.<sup>206</sup> Because Abe’s interpretation of *sunyata* overcomes all dualities, certain states or conditions are not prioritized over other states and conditions. As discussed previously, instead of prioritizing a spiritual state, such as nirvana, over a physical reality, such as impermanence, Abe’s Zen intricately interweaves the concepts of nirvana and impermanence such that one cannot exist without the other. This enmeshed interrelationship between nirvana and impermanence within Abe’s interpretation of Zen discourages idolizing

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203. Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 10-11.

204. Ibid., 17-18.

205. Ibid., 13-14.

206. Ibid., xxi-xxii

either concept over the other. Nirvana cannot be revered over impermanence; in Zen, finite impermanence is neither a state from which we should seek to run, nor a reality that we can deny. On the other hand, valuing impermanence to the point of discounting or denigrating nirvana leaves us in a state of suffering and delusional ignorance. However, the process of double negation, reflected in the concept of *sunyata*, establishes the unitive balance that overcomes the reverencing—or idolizing—of one concept over the other. In other words, because of the negation of impermanence—which is the recognition of nirvana—and the negation of that negation, there is the overcoming of both nirvana and impermanence such that impermanence cannot be without nirvana, and nirvana cannot be without impermanence. It is in this coexistence of nirvana and impermanence that distinguishes Zen from a theistically based, transcendence-centered Christianity. It is the process of double negation, embodied within and symbolized by Abe's interpretation of *sunyata*, that mitigates idolatry within Abe's interpretation of Zen Buddhism.

In contrast, if the goal in Christianity is to live for eternity with God, then Christianity privileges the status of eternal life over the temporal, finite life away from God. A transcendence centered Christianity ultimately exalts the Infinite Other over and against the finite self. Of course, in general, the reverse could be said about atheistic constructs. From an atheistic/humanistic standpoint, the temporal life is privileged and the finite self is exalted, while the idea of some type of Infinite Other is fought against. In contrast to both the theistic and atheistic viewpoints, Masao Abe's nontheistic understanding of Zen and his methodology of double negation allows for mysteries and ineffable infinities while neither prioritizing nor banishing the spiritual from the physical or vice versa. In Abe's Zen, the ability to idolize one or the other has been overcome through the underlying concept of *sunyata* and absolute negation.



### Alternate Interpretation: Nishitani's Understanding of *Sunyata*

Whereas Abe's understanding of Emptiness equates enlightenment with the absolute present moment, Nishitani's understanding of Emptiness prioritizes having *sunyata* transcend nihilism. In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani defines nihilism as "that which renders meaningless the meaning of life;" it is that which causes us to become "a question to ourselves."<sup>207</sup> Meaninglessness leads to what Nishitani refers to as the Great Doubt. The doubt is "Great" because, when the initial question of self arises, the question of the meaninglessness of life extends beyond the self to all things. As a result, this doubt becomes a totality of the self and all things appropriated by the self. As such, "the self becomes Doubt itself," and Doubt "presents itself as reality" in the depths of the "one ground of self and world."<sup>208</sup> In other words, when humans are faced with the reality of death, and when science has negated the idea of an anthropomorphic, absolute, teleological God that grounds all existence, we as humans experience meaningless as reality. Another way to communicate the idea is to say that, for Nishitani, the perceived reality of impermanence brings about debilitating nihilism. As a result, Nishitani seeks, above all else, to transcend nihilism, leading him to his interpretation of *sunyata* as the ultimate solution.

Nishitani notes that Western ontology is ordinarily shackled to the concept of being, wherein being is viewed solely as being. If this shackle can be broken through and denied through the negation of being, then nihilism appears. Upon the appearance of nihilism, ontology becomes shackled to a nothingness wherein nothingness is viewed solely as nothingness.<sup>209</sup>

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207. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 4.

208. *Ibid.*, 18.

209. *Ibid.*, 91.

Nishitani proposes that the only way to overcome nihility is by passing through nihility itself. He asserts that the first step towards overcoming nihility involves nullifying the opposition of subject and object on the fields of sense perception and rationality. Nishitani spends a great deal of time discussing the various fields upon which the opposition of subject and object appear, such as the field of consciousness and intellect, and the field of sensation and reason. These fields, however, represent phenomena; in other words, they reflect the appearance of things as objects and how things appear to the illusory, separate, ego-based subject.<sup>210</sup> As such, these fields have nihility as their ground, and therefore they must be broken through, “allowing nihility to open forth at its ground.”<sup>211</sup>

For Nishitani, the field of nihility is the negation of external, phenomenological objectifications, representations, actualities and subjectivisms. When the people and things of the world return to nihility, they reveal the impermanence of all things as mere illusions that leave nothing lasting behind. However, to remain on this field is to remain in the dualism of being versus nonbeing; a relative abyss of nothingness standing in contrast to a perception of existence. To overcome this nothingness, Nishitani proposes that the field of nihility must be converted to the absolute emptiness of *sunyata*.<sup>212</sup> Upon the negation of nothingness, emptiness remains, and it is an emptiness of absolute non-attachment that is free from the confinements of both being and nothingness.<sup>213</sup> In Nishitani’s interpretation, “the emptiness of *sunyata* is not an emptiness represented as some ‘thing’ outside of being and other than being.” Rather, it is an absolute emptiness, that “is at bottom one with being, even as being is at bottom one with emptiness.”<sup>214</sup> It

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210. Ibid., 119-22.

211. Ibid., 108.

212. Ibid., 122-23.

213. Ibid., 91.

214. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 123. Careful reading notes that Nishitani seems at once to equate

is only when nihility converts to *sunyata* that “the real self-realization of reality takes place.”<sup>215</sup> In fact, Nishitani asserts that *sunyata* “entails at one and the same time an elemental affirmation of the existence of all things (the world) and an elemental affirmation of our own existence;” it is the “Great Affirmation.”<sup>216</sup>

Nishitani insists that Western ontology, up until the point of his writings, leaves the concept of absolute nothingness out of the considerations of being, leaving the mode of being of those things related to absolute nothingness as inconceivable.<sup>217</sup> However, for Nishitani, the field of absolute nothingness—emptied of the ideas of nothingness as juxtaposed to being—is actually the homeground, or elemental source of being, such that “being appears as one with emptiness,” and “emptiness appears as one with being.”<sup>218</sup> Nishitani utilizes the theme of oneness, harkening back to the dharma of Dogen Kigen, philosopher and founder of Japanese Soto Zen Buddhism.<sup>219</sup> Nishitani quotes Dogen regarding the idea of an “original part,” such that “hills, rivers, the earth, plants and trees, tiles and stones, all of these are the self’s own original part.”<sup>220</sup> In other words, per Nishitani, Dogen is referencing a realm from which all things originate; a realm—which

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emptiness with being, while simultaneously asserting that emptiness transcends being. In terms of Nishitani’s process of double negation, emptiness/sunyata represents the endpoint to negation. It can be looked at as absolute negativity, in that nihility has been transcended through the negation of the negation. On the other hand, emptiness/sunyata can be looked at as an absolute transcendence of being in that the double negation transcends any concept of being through the negation of both being and nothingness. However, given that this is Nishitani’s proposed ontology, he asserts that “emptiness can only appear as a self-identity with being,” where both “being and emptiness are seen as co-present from the start and structurally inseparable from one another.” All the while, however, Nishitani states that emptiness/nothingness/sunyata “defies objective representation; no sooner do we assume such an attitude toward it than emptiness withdraws into hiding.” p. 91.

215. Masao Abe, “Nishitani’s Challenge to Philosophy and Theology,” in *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji: Encounter with Emptiness*, ed. Taitetsu Unno (Fremont, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1990), 15.

216. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 131.

217. Ibid., 138-43.

218. Ibid., 123.

219. Dogen, *The Heart of Dogen’s Shobogenzo*, trans. Norman Waddell and Masao Abe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) ix.

220. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 108.

Nishitani asserts—points to the homeground of absolute nothingness. For Nishitani, absolute nothingness—also referred to as the field of emptiness—is the point at which all things are one in the display of their individual possibilities of existence. Absolute nothingness is the point at the precipice of beification; it is the field at which the original unity in identity between nullification—an annihilation, or a transformation into nothingness—and the polar opposite concept of beification, resides.<sup>221</sup> Each thing is manifest in its own mode of being to the point of absolute uniqueness; thus, the field of emptiness is the void of infinite space in which “the totality of things, each of which is absolutely unique, and an absolute center of things, at the same time [are] gathered into one.”<sup>222</sup>

In other words, Nishitani is positing a world—or system of being—that transcends ephemeral phenomena and the corresponding meaninglessness associated with its impermanence. This world is the real world for Nishitani because it recognizes—through the terminology of being-sive-nothingness and nothingness-sive-being—the simultaneous reality of the potentiality of existence of each individual entity in its absolute uniqueness with each and every other thing in its absolute uniqueness, and more importantly, the seeming illusoriness of that reality.<sup>223</sup> However, of import to the discussion of *sunyata*, Nishitani asserts that this system of being he posits is held together as one by the force field exerted on the field of emptiness; it is the field of the possibility of each individual thing, of all things, and of the world.<sup>224</sup> The field of

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221. Ibid, 300.

222. Ibid., 123 and 146.

223. Ibid., 146-47.

224. Ibid., 150.

*sunyata* is so important in this way, that Nishitani posits that there would be chaos and anarchy without this absolute emptiness.<sup>225</sup>

Because Nishitani's methodology of double negation leads to the field of emptiness, Nishitani can use Nietzsche's idea of the Great Affirmation. Nishitani uses Nietzsche's concept of the Great Affirmation—which reflects the affirmation taking place after nihilism's Great Negation—as a description of the affirmation of the self and world. For Nishitani, "each [non-human entity] becomes manifest in its suchness in its very act of affirming itself," while human beings affirm our existence and the existence of the world. However, contrary to Nietzsche's idea of Eternal Recurrence and its stipulation that an affirmed life is the one that would be lived over and over under the same conditions and circumstances, the field of *sunyata*—the force field for the possibility and potentiality of the existence of things and of the world—is not bound to historical repetition. This field of possibility is before the world and all things; in this way, the field of *sunyata* can be said to be transcendent.<sup>226</sup> Nishitani's understanding of *sunyata* has to be a more transcendent—while simultaneously being an absolutely more immanent—locus point for the potentiality of existence, as well a force field keeping this potentiality of the existence of the things and the world together.<sup>227</sup> Through Nishitani's interpretation of *sunyata*, and his application of the methodology of double negation, the nihilistic field of karma is broken through to the field of *sunyata*, where duality of self and other is emptied out to non-ego.<sup>228</sup> Furthermore,

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225. Ibid., 148-49.

226. Ibid., 131 and 150-52.

227. Stephen H. Phillip, "Nishitani's Buddhist Response to "Nihilism," *Journal of the Academy of Religion* 55, no. 1 (1987): 75-106, doi.org/10.1093/jaare/LV.1.75.

228. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 265.

the circumsessional interpenetration of part in whole and whole in part forms the primordial locus of the organismic universe where worlds world.<sup>229</sup>

In summary, Nishitani approaches the concept of *sunyata* as a means of overcoming nihilism. As a result, Nishitani interprets *sunyata* as a force field within which the possibility for the entire system of being is held together. To reach this egoless ineffability using the process of double negation, Nishitani started with the phenomenological field of consciousness, intellect, and reason, and, through negation, broke through to the field of nihility, achieving relative nothingness. However, to overcome nihility, Nishitani called for the field of nihility to be converted to the field of *sunyata* through the emptying out of nihility. The resulting field of *sunyata* overcomes the relative nothingness of nihility, coming before the world and things, and thus transcending the world and things, and serving as the force field holding together the world and things in a system of potentialized being as the transcendent essence of reality.

### **Nishitani and Abe: Two Interpretations of *Sunyata***

In looking at the two interpretations of *sunyata*, it is important to note that Nishitani's goal, from the outset, was to find an understanding of *sunyata* that would address the very real problem of nihilism. As such, the overcoming of impermanence was an absolute necessity in his paradigm and methodology. Nishitani had to more substantively surpass the impermanence of life, because to remain at impermanence would leave his system without a means of overcoming the horrible abyss of nihility. Meanwhile, Abe's goal was the exact opposite of Nishitani's endeavor; Abe sought a philosophical methodology and interpretation of Zen recognizing no

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229. Ibid., xi-xii.

other reality other than the reality of change and impermanence taking place in the temporal world.

Because of Nishitani's specific goal of overcoming nihilism, he is compelled to be more kataphatic in his understanding of *sunyata*. While he is not kataphic in terms of exactly describing the individual and ineffable details regarding what he calls the field of *sunyata*, he is kataphatic in his requirement that his interpretation of *sunyata* be such that it must overcome nihilism. Nishitani's understanding of *sunyata* implies that reality is an overarching nonsubstantial transcendence from which substantiality emerges. In the place of nihilism, Nishitani's *sunyata* is the abyss into which all things affiliated with being—"science, representation, or self"—are encompassed, such that it is the repository from which all authentic modes of being and existence emanate.<sup>230</sup>

*Sunyata* serves as an ontological background, a force-field where being is at one with emptiness. In this oneness, the being of all beings gathers together into one, even while each being retains its reality as an absolutely unique being, and the world retains itself as a system of being. According to Nishitani, *sunyata* holds everything together such that its absence would result in anarchy and chaos.<sup>231</sup> Has not Nishitani's description of his understanding of the field of *sunyata* already become paradigmatic? Nishitani claims that *sunyata* is true infinity; he makes this declaration in direct juxtaposition from the ideas of nihility and the karmic cycle of birth and death.<sup>232</sup> As Phillips notes, it is not that Nishitani employs the concept of *sunyata* as if he was making no literal claim, nor claiming any instantiation of the concept. To the contrary, Nishitani

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230. Ramunas Motiekaitis, "Emptying Sunyata: A Critical Reading of Nishitani's Religion and Nothingness," *International Journal of Area Studies* 10, no. 1 (2015): 69-83, doi: 10.1515/ijas-2015-0004, 72.

231. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 148-49.

232. *Ibid.*, 176.

purports *sunyata* as having features absolutely necessary for the existence of other beings and other worlds.<sup>233</sup>

However, how is *sunyata*, as a universal ontology, intrinsically life affirming as an impersonal force field holding things, beings, and the world together? Why, how, and in what way is *sunyata* meaningful and valuable, especially as it pertains to overcoming nihilism? Nishitani does not seem to supply any substantiation of his claims of affirmation and value regarding *sunyata* from any other standpoint than that of the idea of potentiality. From a standpoint of soteriology and deliverance from the abyss of nihilism, there is the need for the centripetal movement through nihilism to *sunyata*. However, for there to be soteriology, there is also the need in this case—ontologically, epistemologically, and mythologically—for *sunyata* to represent the transcendent centrifugal movement from potential to actualized, representational, perceived and sensualized. How does the primordial nature of the homeground of *sunyata* add in any way to the reality of nihility in the first place? In other words, given the primacy of *sunyata*, why is there nihility? The ultimate question to be posed to Nishitani's interpretation of *sunyata* is to what extent is *sunyata* different from, or opposite of, finite nihility? To what extent is *sunyata* different from the finitude of matter, ideology, representation, and materiality? Regardless of the answer to these questions, what is most important to this work is the understanding that any explanation of difference between infinite, transcendent *sunyata* and the impermanence of actualized finitude would be unsatisfactory both to Pinn's goal of establishing a nontheistic humanism, and to my own goal of providing a non-idolatrous, non-theistic apophatism.

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233. Phillips, "Nishitani's Buddhist Response to 'Nihilism,'" 93-94.



In much the same way that Pinn, in Chapter 2, eschewed allowing for a death of God theology, Pinn would equally have no place for nonsubstantial, transcendental *sunyata* serving as a point of redemption for nihilism. While Nishitani's takes pains to differentiate his interpretation of *sunyata* from the Christian idea of God, a non-theistic, humanistic, apophatic approach would not necessarily need to substitute the idea of God with the idea of a transcendent metaphorical force field grounding the potentiality of existence. Nishitani's attempt to add meaning to life through his interpretation of *sunyata*, could very well be seen by non-theists and humanists to be antithetical to embracing life itself—in its fullness and its impermanence—as valuable and meaningful in and of itself. Nishitani's interpretation is beautiful, meaningful, and provides an exciting option for transpersonal transcendence that only religion—not science—can provide. While Nishitani might have been an option I could have chosen as a more apophatic theistic component of my proposed Black Apophatic Phenomenology, I have chosen Marion because it allows for the possibility of phenomenological self-revelation. While Nishitani solidly allows for transpersonal transcendence through *sunyata*'s overcoming of the personal/impersonal duality, Marion's apophatics allows for a phenomenological other without the use of ontology and without necessarily negating transpersonal phenomenological experience.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, however, Pinn is not looking to overcome nihilism, especially as it pertains to the struggle against dehumanization and oppression. For Pinn, there is value and humanity in the living, active effort of struggle. Abe's interpretation of *sunyata* is in agreement with Pinn about the whole of existence, and not just in the liberative struggle. For Abe, "only when both worldly morality and religious pietism, both the secular and the holy, both immanence and transcendence, are completely left behind, does one come to Ultimate Reality

and attain real liberation.”<sup>234</sup> In other words, Abe’s interpretation of *sunyata* eschews the desire for anything beyond the here and now. *Sunyata* is not seeking to worship the Buddha, or eulogize dead gods, or long for some ethereal state of nirvana. *Sunyata* is the liberation that comes from embracing impermanence. It involves living this life, as it is, on its own terms, without illusions. In Abe’s work, only unchanging, enduring, substantive things that can exist on their own can be considered real; the ideas and concepts of metaphysics and religion are but mere linguistic reifications. Metaphysical absolutes, concepts and abstractions, per Abe, cannot do what Nishitani desires. They cannot communicate reality, express essence, or reveal the actuality of humanity. The claims of metaphysics are neither universal nor real. To the contrary, per Abe, they are human conceptions that are nonsubstantial, empty and devoid of reality.

Yet, even though Abe’s understanding of *sunyata* and Zen involves the here and now, it is simultaneously more than just the here and now. It is this “more” of *sunyata*—*sunyata*’s inability to be objectified—that allows for God-talk, and that allows for there to be so much more than just impermanence. Ultimate Reality is not far away; Ultimate Reality has its reality in the here and now. Furthermore, *sunyata* is not simply negation, rather it is the affirmation of liberation. *Sunyata* overcomes nihility through overcoming all dualities and providing liberation from rigid attachment to either of the positive and negative polarities—every aspect is included, nothing is left out.<sup>235</sup> Abe understands the limitations of science; science can explain facts, but it cannot answer existential questions of existence and meaning. As a result, he understands that there needs to be talk about God. Yet, Abe’s understanding of *sunyata* allows room for significant God-talk while still differentiating itself from theism and Christianity. Put very succinctly,

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234. Abe, “God, Emptiness, and the True Self,” *Eastern Buddhist*, no. 2 (1969): 58  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20181026032646/http://www.worldwisdom.com/public/library/default.aspx>

235. *Ibid.*, 63-65

“*sunyata* or nothingness in Zen is not a ‘nothing’ out of which all things were created by God, but a ‘nothing’ from which God himself emerged.”<sup>236</sup> In Abe’s interpretation of Zen, Ultimate Reality cannot be defined by a metaphysical *Causa Sui* dichotomizing and prioritizing essence over existence; nor can it be a Christian God representing the value judgment of good in the duality of good and evil. Abe firmly asserts, “When Buddhism transcends the axiological dimension, it overcomes all duality completely and attains a non-dualistic position.”<sup>237</sup> This negation of negation—double negation—results in Emptiness, which overcomes all dualities, prioritizations, and value judgments. As a result, this Emptiness is also freed from linguistic reification and substantialization of human generated concepts in all dimensions, even the religious dimension.<sup>238</sup> In fact, as a matter of consistency, Emptiness itself must protect itself from abstraction, substantialization, and attachment by self-negation or self-emptying. Thus, Abe concludes, Emptiness is not a static state of non-substantiality, “but rather a dynamic function of emptying everything, including itself,” such that “everything without exception is empty.”<sup>239</sup> This is a great example of how the door for conversation—god-talk—can be opened, without the need for theistic capitulation.

In this chapter I discussed Masao Abe’s nontheistic interpretation of *sunyata*, how *sunyata* mitigates idolatry through its dialectical overcoming of dualities, and how *sunyata* is reached through Abe’s process of double negation. I also compared Abe’s understanding of *sunyata* to Keiji Nishitani’s interpretation of the concept, and further discussed why Abe’s interpretation of *sunyata* is more suitable for use in the development of the non-theistic component of my

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236. Masao Abe, “God, Emptiness, and the True Self,” 66

237. Masao Abe, *Zen and Comparative Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 47.

238. *Ibid.*, 49.

239. *Ibid.*

proposed Black Apophatic Phenomenology. For the purposes of utilizing the concepts of *sunyata*/emptiness and the process of double negation as a piece of the non-theistic component of Black Apophatic Phenomenology, I will utilize the term “Ultimate Reality” to connote the nontheistic ineffability and unsubstantiality that grounds the idea of the absolute present moment. As mentioned previously in this chapter, I understand Ultimate Reality as the ineffable, unsubstantial, cosmological universe of all that is and is not. I see Ultimate Reality as being in the constant state of activity; of becoming; of consistently being mutually interpenetrating; of overcoming all dualities and providing liberation from rigid attachment to either end of the positive and negative polarities; of unceasingly protecting itself from abstractions, objectifications, substantiations, and attachments through self-negation; and of engaging in the pure activity of forever emptying itself out. I conclude this work in the next chapter, expounding in more detail about BAP, BAP’s theistic and non-theistic apophatisms, and BAP’s implications for African Americans.

## CHAPTER FIVE: TOWARDS A BLACK APOPHATIC PHENOMENOLOGY

Is Anthony Pinn's African American Non-Theistic Humanist theology (AANHT)—a theology that requires the total disposal of the idea of God and the complete silencing of God-talk—the solution to escaping the idolatries demonstrated by classical Christianity? Pinn's AANHT is not a solution for overcoming the idolatries demonstrated by classical Christianity. Pinn's AANHT not only engages in the same type of idolatry it seeks to combat, but it also excludes theists and non-theists from his theology. In his attempt to broaden the spectrum of theology beyond Christian theism and reduce the possibility for suffering to be seen as redemptive in the process of working toward liberation, he alienates theists of all backgrounds through his banishment of God and God-talk. Instead, I propose Black Apophatic Phenomenology as a solution to the idolatry of classical Christianity, *and* the idolatry generated by Pinn's AANHT. My proposed Black Apophatic Phenomenology is a philosophical, non-propositional, phenomenological apophatism that overcomes the problems of onto-theology and idolatry by allowing for post-metaphysical conceptions of God and/or Ultimate Reality. Black Apophatic Phenomenology uses methodologies of apophasis to allow for God-talk while simultaneously addressing the idolatry that Pinn's seeks to eradicate, but that Pinn's AANHT is unsuccessful in accomplishing.

The God of classical Christianity is idolatrous because of its dogmatic kataphasis, that specifically and definitively establishes the essence of God. Due to the manner in which classical Christianity stipulates its kataphasis, it assumes to understand God's characteristics of omnipotence and omnibenevolence. Pinn critiques classical Christianity's assumptions of omnipotence and omnibenevolence as they pertain to the classical Christian God who is also said

to be the liberator of the oppressed. Pinn asserts that such a God, who is said kataphatically to be omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and liberative in the midst of the continued suffering of the oppressed, allows for suffering to be seen as redemptive. Pinn cannot and will not accept the concept of redemptive suffering.

In response to the dogmatic kataphasis of classical Christianity, Pinn proposes a dogmatic kataphasis through his AANHT that is positive in its denunciation of all aspects of the God of Cone's Black Liberation theology and early iterations of Womanist theologies. Pinn's kataphasis exists only to stand against and oppose kataphatic positive affirmation made by adherents of the God of classical Christianity and those theologies based on classical Christianity. As a result, Pinn's AANHT is also based on an idolatrous, truncated understanding of God. Furthermore, Pinn's idolatry is magnified because he insists on negating his own assessment of God. By attempting to negate the God he rails against in AANHT, Pinn engages in an even greater level of idolatry by attempting to dictate whom God really is for all theists. However, given that Pinn's AANHT refuses to acknowledge the idea of God or any talk about God, Pinn's AANHT excludes and alienates all theists regardless of theology. Rather than overcoming idolatry, Pinn's AANHT merely pushes back with its own version of idolatry.

As a solution to the idolatry of both classical Christianity and Pinn's AANHT, I propose Black Apophatic Phenomenology. From a position of theism, BAP uses phenomenology rather than theology and ontology to discuss the possibility of divine revelation. Because BAP does not approach theism using ontology, BAP does not encounter onto-theology, and thus, it is not subject to idolatry. Phenomenologically, BAP does not follow the example of Husserl's transcendental realism, eschewing its emphasis upon intending essence. Also, while appreciating

Heidegger's overall expansion of the understanding of phenomenology, BAP does not adhere to the constraints of using Dasein as the sole metric in the interpretation of phenomena. Rather, BAP adopts the apophatic phenomenology as postulated by Marion. BAP's phenomenology, utilizing the *epoche* of absolute givenness, allows for the possibility of a saturating Saturated Phenomenon with the potentiality to be both self-revelatory, and incapable of either intention or full perception. In other words, this apophatic phenomenology allows for the possibility of divine revelation, by definition, while also realizes that it can never fully know the Revelator.

Therefore, BAP uses apophatic language to point towards that which we can never kataphatically acknowledge with certainty. From a point of non-theism, BAP also apophatically addresses concepts of the divine without capitulating to the divine. Through the methodology of double negation, and the use of eastern philosophically influenced concepts—such as Ultimate Reality, absolute negation and overcoming duality—BAP overcomes idolatry by not privileging being over nonbeing, which also delivers it nontheistically from onto-theology. In all ways, BAP allows for God-talk, not excluding theists or nontheists. Thus, a Black Apophatic Phenomenology, based on Marion's Apophatic Phenomenology and Abe's apophatic methodology of double negation, overcomes onto-theology, ontology, and idolatry while preserving, and even facilitating God-talk. BAP functions as a phenomenology rather than a theology; as a result, there is no need to modify the definitions of religion and theology as Pinn attempts to do. BAP, through the methodology of double-negation, facilitates interaction with the concept of the Ineffable, whether the indescribable pragmatically references theistic ideologies or whether the inexplicable references non-theistic concepts of ineffability such as Ultimate Reality.

Marion and Abe utilize the methodology of double negation in very much the same way, for very different purposes. Marion refers to the process of double negation as de-nomination.

Marion empties the ideas of the Divine and of predication by negating kataphatic descriptions of the Divine, and then negating that negation, resulting in an empty, pragmatic pointing towards the divine. In other words, Marion overcomes the duality of Divine predication through his process of de-nomination. Abe, on the other hand, demonstrates *sunyata* through the process of emptying by which an ideology is emptied of its abstraction and brought into the present moment. In other words, Abe uses the process of double-negation to overcome the mere differentiation of opposites. The result is an ineffable, simultaneous, sameness of opposites that remain fully, distinctly opposite from, and yet, fully essential to, and present with, the other. BAP adopts and utilizes these methodologies. With Black Apophatic Phenomenology, the ineffable is released from the confines of ontology and onto-theology; it continues to defy predication, and it avoids idolatry. God-talk is preserved with the understanding that we are not to predicate the Ineffable, but we are to understand that, as we gather together for God-talk, our language will be apophatic. In other words, all that we can say inadequately points to that which is inexplicable, indefinable, unknowable, and uncontainable.

### **Pinn and AANHT: Promise and Peril**

As noted in Chapter Two, Pinn has much to contribute to the conversation regarding God-talk. Pinn's AANHT is committed to a telos of black liberation. His ultimate desire is to focus on black liberation as the central issue of all endeavors. It is this telos which leads to Pinn's umbrage with the God of traditional monotheism as represented in Cone's God of Black Liberation Theology and in much of God-talk.

Pinn is unwilling to accept Cone's original understanding of God—as both omnipotent and omnibenevolent liberator—in the presence of Black suffering. In the original outworking of



Cone's Black Liberation Theology, God identified with the poor and oppressed so strongly that God was purported to be ontologically black. Pinn observes that if this omnipotent and omnibenevolent God is going to be defined by that God's identification with the poor and oppressed, then the liberation of Black people is the truth claim against which that God is to be assessed. For Pinn, this God of Liberation must not exist because, according to the truth claim against which this liberating God is to be assessed, God has been weighed and found wanting.

I agree with Pinn's assessments regarding the classical Christian God of traditional monotheism. Classical philosophical and theological truth claims—for example, the metaphysical claims regarding God as the Ultimate Source, or God as the Highest Being—trade the ambiguity, the potency, the potentiality, and the boundlessness of God for a perceived certainty about God. Pinn asserts that a God that ontologically identifies with the oppressed cannot be questioned regarding omnipotence and omnibenevolence without being tripped up by those very same characteristics. In addition, the assumption that God is omnibenevolent, especially in the face of Black suffering, does call into question how an omnipotent God allows the continuation of that suffering if that God is also omnibenevolent. In much the same way, Pinn recognizes that requiring God to be a liberator begs the question of God's legitimacy as omnipotent and omnibenevolent in the face of existing oppression and suffering.

The idea of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God of Liberation in conjunction with the existence of the oppressive suffering of Black people is extremely problematic for Pinn, because the acceptance of any kind of oppressive suffering opens the door for the idea that such suffering can be redemptive. Pinn cannot accept that oppressive suffering serves any positive purpose. As a result, Pinn cannot accept the existence of God—especially the existence of the God of

classical Christianity. If there is no classical God, there is no reason theologically to see suffering as redemptive or positive in any way. In order for Black suffering to make sense in light of a loving God with the power to liberate, aspects of Black suffering must be seen by the Divine as redemptive, either in this life or the next. Without an understanding that some suffering is redemptive, it would be difficult to still maintain that an omnipotent God is also omnibenevolent. Acceptance of oppression and suffering of any kind as being allowed, or even willed, by God can possibly disincentivize some believers from the primacy of the cessation of such suffering, and the liberation of African Americans. I also agree with Pinn that the theological structure supporting classical Christianity also significantly influences the political and socioeconomic structures of American society. Challenges to the oppression that is systemically imbedded in the foundations of American culture become challenges to what has been ordained by the omnipotent, omnibenevolent, classical Christian God. For Pinn, liberation and oppressive suffering are complete opposites; they are so deeply opposed that there can be no place for both at the same time. In other words, the continual existence of oppressive suffering means that a God of Liberation cannot exist.

In the same way that Pinn's critiques have merit, Pinn's *telos* also holds promise. Pinn's *telos* is Black liberation, which is manifested through AANHT's embodied humanism. Embodied humanism is the intentional focus on the bodies of African Americans as they seek meaning in all of their physical and sociopolitical complexities and multiplicities. As a result, embodied humanism involves both the individual and the community. As a reminder, embodiment is so important to Pinn that he believes that, without an intentional focus on the bodies of African-Americans—in particular, African American bodies metaphorically representing sources of cultural production and Black inclusion and/or exclusion from social systems—a theologian will

have a distorted view of all the sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and liberative factors affecting African Americans. In other words, embodiment is essential to being able to most clearly assess—in terms of meaning, nature, function, and purpose—the systemic structures that alter African-American bodies. One example is that Pinn, with his search for complex subjectivity, is trying to expand sources of meaning and meaning-making for African Americans beyond traditional God-talk. Instead of looking to the spiritual, Pinn exhorts us, through his nitty-gritty hermeneutics, to be open to other sources, such as the blues and hip hop, for providing African Americans with sources of strength and examples of perseverance in the face of oppression, racism, and dehumanization.

Pinn's emphasis on black bodies and black experiences is crucial. Black people in material black bodies experience the type of racism and oppression that causes mental, emotional and physical harm—even death—when black people try to live within America's societal structures. A complex, nuanced narrative and understanding of the body is necessary in an environment like the United States where having dark skin is routinely seen as threatening. As a result of the perceived menace that dark skin possesses, black bodies have been threatened, attacked, and incarcerated, and murdered. Anecdotally, in my church experiences I was taught that the body was an object to be tamed and controlled, because it was irreparably damaged by sin. I was taught to look forward to the day when we could lay these sinful bodies down, and be given perfect, celestial bodies. Rather than denigrating the body, however, Pinn expands its meaning by further recognizing the body as a metaphor for black bodies' participation in the fabric of American society. I agree that a thorough focus on the matrix of factors affecting the physical—as well as metaphorical—bodies of black people is crucial to appreciate the positive

and negative complexities surrounding the totality of meaning making experiences for African Americans.

Pinn's commitment to black liberation, black embodiment and humanism are important critiques and additions to the black liberation theological project. However, Pinn's proposal to end all God-talk is troublesome! It is troublesome because it is idolatrous; it is also troublesome because it is exclusive. In chapter one, I defined idolatry as the assumption that one's ideology and understanding of God encompasses the essence of God. Regarding Pinn's AANHT and idolatry, I assert that AANHT's idolatry is incumbent upon the understanding of God that Pinn has chosen to espouse. In his AANHT, Pinn has chosen to focus primarily on the rejection of the God of classical monotheism. This God is assumed to be omnipotent and omnibenevolent. However, because of Pinn's singular focus in this area, Pinn's AANHT does not even consider the possibility of Divinity without those assumptions. In making this move, Pinn chose not to consider any other theistic, nor any other non-theistic, understandings of theology. This choice results in the potential exclusion of other theistic and non-theistic philosopher/theologians from the conversation; and this decision is the very definition of idolatry itself. AANHT does not speak to other theisms such as polytheism, pantheism, and panentheism. If God is limited to the God of classical theism, then based on my existential experiences and my resulting queries, I question what my understanding of God's omnipotence is in light of my understanding of God's omnibenevolence, and vice versa. I cannot assume that my understanding of omnipotence and omnibenevolence is either fixed or ubiquitously accepted even if we limit the idea of divinity to classical monotheism. In other words, I have to qualify my understanding of omnipotence and omnibenevolence as divine attributes because my existential critique of God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence in light of oppressive suffering is dependent upon the God I envision. While

many would say that God is not the God of our own making, it is also true that humanity's epistemological endeavor to interpret an intangible Deity is by no means a propositionally exact science.

Pinn's attempt to expand the notion of religion past theism in general, and classical Christianity specifically, through his AANHT, would not automatically be idolatrous except for his insistence upon denigrating all aspects of the concept of God, and totally ceasing God-talk. By simply rejecting the idea of God, Pinn's AANHT does not actually overcome the prevailing assertions of classical monotheism. Classical Christianity is idolatrous in espousing a particular understanding of omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and other divine characteristics as divinely decreed by God; Pinn is justified in his critique that classical Christianity's understanding of Deity—which its adherents claim as the one and only True God—should be questioned. However, rather than just questioning it, Pinn simply rejects theism in totality—including any recognitions of its value, or how it might lead to greater meaning in the lives of those who adhere to some form of it—through his AANHT. Pinn substitutes one unassailable understanding of God for another unassailable, total rejection of his understanding of the God of classical Christianity—which, for Pinn, is a stand-in representative for all of theism. His AANHT is idolatrous in its structure; Pinn is specifically rejecting the classical Christianity practiced in the West, as well as the monotheistic religious traditions that have been influenced by this God. By not allowing for other ways of viewing God, God-talk, and religion, Pinn's AANHT has an idolatrous view of God, as defined by Jean Luc-Marion.

To review, Marion defines idolatry as the attempt by humanity to comprehend the incomprehensible. Marion described his definition of idolatry phenomenologically, asserting that

idolatry involves one believing she has a full perception of a phenomenon despite the phenomenon revealing itself in a manner that completely and totally overwhelms the perceptions of the one observing the phenomenon. In phenomenological terms, a phenomenon that could possibly be considered on par with divine revelation could not—by definition—be fully perceived. Yet, to assert that one has perceived this divine revelation in a manner that suggests she has fully—or even significantly—known and understood this phenomenon begs the assessment of idolatry. The idol, in representation of humanity’s perception of the divine, becomes what humans determine to be the actual essence of the divinity.

The main point is that idolatry, for Marion, involves finite humanity’s assumption that they can deduce an accurate understanding of the ineffable from what little they can perceive. Phenomenologically, the idea is that when one’s perceptions have been overwhelmed and one cannot even fix one’s gaze upon the phenomenon that saturates and overwhelms all perception; one can only perceive based on that infinitesimal aspect upon which one can fix one’s gaze. An idol is that which is visible to the human gaze, and that is subsequently deemed to be the phenomenon in its totality—its essence. In other words, humans see what they can, much like gazing into a mirror. Marion asserts that we see what we want to see; we see what we can think of and that is the idol. However, at its absolute best, the idol is a denigrated, demeaned, and corrupted image of what is truly incomprehensible. If this extremely inferior and severely limited perception is thought to be the very essence of the divine, then idolatry has occurred.

Reviewing the general problem of idolatry, the specific problem of Pinn’s AANHT and idolatry, and apophysis as my solution to the problem of idolatry, idolatry in general involves regarding ideologies and symbols to be the full essence of the divine in terms of predication and definition. Idolatry can make God a mirror of who and what we think God is, or what God is not,

or what God should be. Idolatry holds God captive to us; God is truncated, and our control of God's parameters allows us to have comfort in the certainty of our interpretations within the theological systems we have constructed. Idolatry is not restricted to theists. Atheists, based on the surety of what they hold to be true in and of the world, can be just as dogmatic in their beliefs, which they take to be as veritable as empirical facts. Philosophy and philosophers seek certainty also, eschewing the variability and fallibility of human senses and seeking a stable, metaphysical, ontological grounding to understanding the essence of being. Theists entrapped themselves in this same type of pursuit of perfection and certainty. Theists took on the idea of ontology, concluding that the essence of God is essentially captured in the idea that God is the highest being. Philosophy's encounter with metaphysics, and theology's foray into ontology, resulted in an idolatrous onto-theology that limited their Source of being to their respective philosophical and theological paradigms. When those paradigms were superseded, the source of being for those paradigms was devalued and exposed as the truncated idols that they had always been.

Pinn, with his AANHT, has aligned himself in the same way with these other philosophical and theological systems. The basis of AANHT is the absence of God and the cessation of God-talk. Pinn seems to demonstrate a dogmatic outlook toward God, declaring unequivocally that God is not only not real, but also a totally ineffective symbol for African Americans. Pinn's assertion that God is ineffective is pertinent to his critique of theists' dependence upon a God that, Pinn declares, has shown no demonstrable evidence of liberating activities. Furthermore, Pinn is critical of God—whom he deems to be ineffectual, substantially nonexistent, and symbolically unnecessary—because he believes theologically based solutions to oppression are too simplistic to deal with the all-encompassing systemic attacks against black

bodies. As long as African Americans believe in God, Pinn believes that they will depend on that God, in some way, for their liberation, instead of taking on the entire onus of struggle upon themselves. His AANHT is as adamant in its stipulation that the idea of God must be abandoned as traditional classical Christianity is that God is the omnipotent Sovereign over all. As a result, Pinn's AANHT seems to be the mirror opposite of the theists he is trying to decenter, especially as it pertains to his critique of God and liberation. In other words, Pinn's AANHT dismisses God as nonexistent and irrelevant, only from the standpoint of his assumptions regarding traditional, Westernized Christianity. His AANHT engages in a reverse kataphasis; he states positively with certainty about what God is not, with no balance or offset to his positive statements. Pinn's AANHT does not address other metaphysical/theological/divine predication such as that proposed by process theology or indigenous African religions, or non-theistic religions such as Buddhism, or a wider range of more nuanced liberal theological viewpoints, or in the case of this work, the apophasis of Black Apophatic Phenomenology.

As a result of Pinn's idolatry, AANHT has an additional problem that needs to be addressed. AANHT is exclusive in that the paradigm leaves out the spectrum of African American theists and non-theists. AANHT seeks to eradicate the use of God as the theological and philosophical foundation of community for African Americans as it pertains to their liberation. Regarding liberation, Pinn's AANHT must do away with the idea of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God to eliminate support for the concept of redemptive suffering. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Pinn cannot abide with any paradigm that would allow for the possibility of seeing suffering as somehow redemptive or ultimately good in any way, for either the oppressed or the oppressor. However, his goal of removing the potential justification of redemptive suffering results in the alienation of theists of all kinds. I mentioned Pinn's critique of the Beloved



Community in Chapter 2, and I agree with his assessment to a large extent. I do believe that the Beloved Community is too relationship oriented, too restricted, and too dependent upon an assumed communion among adherents to the Beloved Community. It is as if those describing and adhering to the concept of the Beloved Community assume that there will be the achievement of mutuality, equality, and unity at some point within this community, rather than understanding that it will be just another community with the same power dynamics, inequities, and disharmonies existent in all human endeavors—with the slivers of hope for liberative breakthroughs here and there. While I have no supporting empirical corroboration, anecdotally I can relate to having the assumption that God will create a Godly community, only to be frustrated and disappointed that the community ends up being much more worldly and much less godly than I expected it to be.

I can understand why Pinn's AANHT rejects the Beloved Community; I agree with his critiques of the concept. It is crucial to the expectations of all involved in a community that the concept of community has nonconformity and uncertainty as characteristics. Communal relationships should not be thought of reductively—in other words, in a way that stipulates that certain relationships or interactions must be created or maintained. On the other hand, Pinn's thoughts that community should have no fixed assumptions of what is good and bad are problematic. I agree with Pinn if he means that one religious tradition or theological interpretation should not be the standard by which good and bad are established for the community. However, I think that calls for liberation of the oppressed defy rational logic, and appeal instead to communal concepts such as right and wrong. While the specific interpretations of "right" and "wrong" cannot be static, eternal precepts, I do believe that issues of right and wrong must be debated within the community. I prefer Pinn's understanding of community over

the Beloved Community because community is exposed for what it is not. It should be accepted that communities are made up of fallible human beings with extremely complex, imperfect relationships. Reflecting upon community as participating in the ebb and flow of life allows for an understanding that there will be times when community is broken, when individuals are ostracized, and when the complexities of relationships reveal what is not possible. My expression of community here reflects the difficulties and potential temporary failures associated with attempts at community; however, what I discuss here does not involve situations of exclusion. I contend that Pinn's AANHT is not inclusive as it pertains to theists, and as a result, Pinn simultaneously undermines his ability to fully address his desire for embodied humanism.

However, the rejection of the Beloved Community is different from a rejection of God-talk. Furthermore, the rejection of God is different from the rejection of God-talk. There is no consensus among theists regarding the Beloved Community. It is likely that there are proponents, opponents, and those theists who have no real stance regarding the concept. It is not likely that embracing or rejecting the idea of the Beloved Community would affect a significant number of theists. Even the rejection of God does not guarantee to discourage the participation of theists in discussions with humanists and atheists. Again, while significant numbers of theists might not be able to interact with a theological system that rejects the concept of God, some theists might pursue the option of how the possible absence of God interacts with the proposed rejections of God. Regardless of whether or not God's absence versus God's non-existence is a viable discussion within the spectrum of theism and atheism, at least there might possibly be room for discussion. However, erasure of God in God's totality—including God-talk—leaves theists with little commonalities from which to operate, even when the commonality should be liberation of

the oppressed. Atheists would be at a significant disadvantage in the struggle for liberation if they alienate African-American theists.

Pinn not only disregards theists with his AANHT; by rejecting all concepts of God, Pinn closes the door on conversations regarding any extra-human or sub-human beings. For example, in Buddhism there are gods, demons, ghosts and beings in the realms of hell; however, none of these entities are considered Ultimate in the same sense as Western deities. Pinn's disavowal of God and all God-talk force non-Western philosophical, theological and religious understandings to be relegated to the same fate as that of Westernized, classical Christianity, especially as Pinn designates this specialized understanding of deity in his AANHT. In other words, African Americans that embrace any other metaphysical understanding other than traditional Western monotheism have no outlet for communication under Pinn's AANHT. As a result, both theists and non-theists would be alienated by Pinn's AANHT. Only Atheists could expect to be welcomed within AANHT; and while atheists can contribute greatly to black liberation, I am certain that black liberation overall would suffer if liberation depended solely upon black atheists to the alienation of black theists and nontheists.

Pinn is dedicated to representing the dynamism, ambiguity, and uncertainty of a finite life without the guarantees of God's participance or deliverance. However, without God, God-talk, and the religious institutional structures contributing to African-American life and history, Pinn's AANHT is left without an important aspect of meaning making to and for the African American community. Therefore, I propose a Black Apophatic Phenomenology (BAP) which overcomes the idolatries present in Pinn's AANHT, and as a result, draws in the African-American theists previously excluded from the conversation created by Pinn's AANHT. I will show how BAP

draws from Marion's apophatic phenomenology and Abe's double negation to address the idolatry and exclusion that is present in Pinn's AANHT.

## **BLACK APOPHATIC PHENOMENOLOGY**

In contrast to Pinn's AANHT, I propose a Black Apophatic Phenomenology (hereafter BAP) that utilizes both the apophasis of Marion's Apophatic Phenomenology and Masao Abe's apophatic methodology of double negation. BAP is non-kataphatic and non-dogmatic; BAP broadens the theological continuum without denigrating the concept of God and without prohibiting God-talk. Put another way, BAP uses apophasis to foster inclusion within the African American community, facilitate dialogue amongst the diversity of African Americans, and encourage increased knowledge and understanding of the variety of African American experiences. As with all paradigms, BAP has its limitations. One such limitation is that BAP does not ensure total participation. For example, those who are dogmatic about their beliefs may choose not to engage in apophatic dialogue or participate in rituals promoting inclusivity. However, the effectiveness of BAP as a paradigm is not impinged by the lack of participation by intolerant people. While the focus of this dissertation is primarily upon African American religious experiences and the theologies that inform them, BAP increases the purview of meaning making experiences that can be said to influence African American religiosity and humanity. In other words, BAP facilitates inclusivity, understanding, and dialogue regarding those practices that support African American diversity of experience, spirituality, and humanity.

BAP is overwhelmingly and inexorably intertwined with the idea of embodied humanism. I fully accept and endorse Pinn's necessarily complex idea of embodied humanism

with its focus on African American meaning seeking in all of its physical, economic and sociopolitical multiplicities. It is only through BAP's acceptance of embodied humanism that BAP can serve to question traditional theistic, non-theistic, and atheistic presuppositions and boundaries. BAP, by allowing for a philosophical paradigm decentering idolatry, fundamentalism, and dogmatism, seeks to shift and expand the understanding of the world incorporating Black bodies. Humanism is essential to BAP because BAP realizes that embodied humanism is crucial to an expansion of phenomenological, meaning-making experiences that, in turn, expand the potentialities for experiences with the ineffable. Experiences specific to black bodies worldwide are plentiful. Phenomena intuited as examples of determination and tenacity in the face of dehumanization, degradation, incarceration, and subjugation are replete. However, more diverse experiences, from the mundane, to the sublime, to the possibility of divine self-revelation, can be recognized and celebrated. More importantly, BAP supports human life. The methodology of double negation supports the overcoming of the prioritization of the ineffable over the impermanent. The overcoming of dualities reveals the ineffability in harmony and in sameness with the impermanent. As a result, double negation and the overcoming of dualities recognizes every aspect of experience and perception as both incomprehensible and fleeting. BAP facilitates the recognition and appreciation of the routine and remarkable, and all of the experiences in between. Simultaneously, BAP facilitates the complexities of embodied humanism and the generation of phenomenal experiences to be queried as to how its meaning making ability contributes to African American experiences as a whole.

### **BAP and AANHT**

Contrary to Pinn's AANHT, BAP seeks a potential expression of the divine—specifically from the vantage point of the possibility of revelation—that is simultaneously ineffable and,

therefore, not idolatrous. In other words, BAP's apophasis does not predicate an extant ontological reality. As a result, BAP's apophasis does not experience the metaphysical pitfalls of onto-theology. It does, however, still allow for the possibility of saturating, unendurable, yet revelatory phenomena. Entertaining the possibility of the divine leaves a great deal of room for positively descriptive apophatic God-talk, but no room for either positive or negative kataphatic idolatry.

However, apophasis does not necessarily have to embrace the ideas of deity and revelation. BAP uses eastern philosophically influenced concepts—such as Ultimate Reality, absolute negation and overcoming duality—to approach apophasis from the vantagepoint of non-theism. As a result, BAP also allows for God-talk and respectful interactions with theism in a way that does not capitulate to any god or gods. BAP maintains its own phenomenological metaphysics represented by various ineffable philosophical concepts. Whereas the classical Christian God is reified as real, transcendent, unchanging, and absolute, BAP's apophasis also allows for the possibility of a non-theistic ineffable, unconditioned, and all-encompassing Ultimate Reality. This possible Ultimate Reality overcomes binary dualities that privilege finite categories such as being over nonbeing. In providing for this nontheistic possibility, BAP also escapes the trap of onto-theology. Where there is no hierarchy of beings—dehomocentrism, and no privileging of being over nonbeing—neither is there the privileging of a Heideggerian, self-disclosing Dasein over other beings, nor the ontological difference between ontic being and the Being of beings. BAP utilizes the apophatic methodology of double negation to overcome dualities and move beyond a mere refutation of theism to existentially reflect non-theism through the pure activity of life and living. In other words, BAP allows for God-talk that is infused with the realization that all of existence is the ephemeral, unenduring, ever-changing, activity that is

the infinite in each present moment of life. BAP also establishes that religious ritual and practice can serve as a pragmatic counterbalance to the inexplicable, the ineffable and the ambiguous theoretical and philosophical conundrums generated through the methodology of apophysis.

Finally, the impetus behind Pinn's AANHT and its desire to eliminate God is that Pinn does not want the idea of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God to justify suffering as being redemptive in the midst of the struggle for Black Liberation. However, BAP addresses this issue by borrowing part of its outlook regarding race, suffering, and liberation from Victor Anderson's *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, and *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience*. One of the many difficulties associated with the inclusion of race in one's philosophical or theological paradigm is determining the significance of its influence. James Cone, for example, made race the single most important lens through which Black Liberation Theology was to be viewed. Placing this level of import on race in his theological system—while courageous and groundbreaking at the time—resulted in truncating the interpretation of God, limiting the range of identities attributed to Black people within his theological system, and artificially stipulating the reality in which the theology operates. In other words, God can only be on the side of the oppressed; black people's identities were tied primarily to experiences of suffering and humiliation; and life was predominantly that of constant oppression with the hope of some perpetually future, undefined liberation. As noted earlier in this chapter, while Pinn rejects Cone's God, Pinn's paradigm still defines black people like Cone: in terms of oppression, humiliation, suffering and seeking liberation.

Alternatively, Victor Anderson notes how theological and philosophical paradigms can be exploited by the inclusion of race. In *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, Anderson points out that Black Liberation theology merged metaphysics and ontology to cause blackness and the black

experience to become “a totality of meaning.”<sup>240</sup> In other words, Black Liberation defines the essence of black experience as suffering and struggle; therefore, the black experience is inextricably bound to and defined by whiteness and racism. Facilitated within the structure of our own black theological paradigm, whiteness and racism exert their insidious control.<sup>241</sup> In Creative Exchange, however, Anderson proposes a correction to this issue. For Anderson, race, though experienced as a priori, is still a historical and sociological construct affecting social meaning and identifying, defining, and influencing communal interactions in the West.<sup>242</sup> Anderson, recognizing how Cone’s theology collapsed metaphysics and ontology, astutely asks the question, “is black experience fundamentally suffering and humiliation?”<sup>243</sup> Furthermore, can black people “only view God through black eyes turned on white supremacy?”<sup>244</sup> Anderson is very concerned that African American experience not be seen only as experiences of struggle, resistance, and survival.<sup>245</sup> Race as it pertains to African American experience is multivariant, not reductive. Race does not have to be a derogatory concept. However, race, though not always negative and harmful, is vulnerable to manipulation; to historical, sociological and cultural changes; and to corruptibility. It is not, however, the monolithic, essentialist cornerstone of Creative Exchange; rather, it serves as what Anderson terms a “deep symbol” of African American religious life. Simultaneously, race as deep symbol, is dynamic and ambiguous enough to reflect the wide range of racial expression within the African American community.<sup>246</sup>

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240. Anderson, Victor, *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2008, 8.

241. Ibid.

242. Ibid., 4.

243. Ibid., 7.

244. Ibid.

245. Ibid., 8.

246. Ibid., 4.



Race is not the only factor reflecting dynamism and ambiguity. In fact, under the rubric of African American religious experience, the factors facilitating interdependence, creative exchange, and openness foster religious experiences that are “relational, processive, open, fluid and irreducible.”<sup>247</sup> For Anderson, creative exchange facilitates an interpretation and understanding of one’s religious experience that allows it to expand past one’s specific faith community and faith tradition to actualize creative instances, moments and events of the Beloved Community.<sup>248</sup> Anderson is also very sensitive about the pitfalls of essentialism and reductivism. He continuously discusses his concept of unity in difference so that African American religious experience can be reflected and interpreted as widely as possible within the realm of human experience. In fact, experience itself is his unifying factor. The unity of experience provides for a multiplicity of subjects; each and everyone has narrative of their experiences to share. It is at the point in which the narratives develop into personal and communal personalities demonstrating specific desires and certain proclivities that diverse differences are recognized.<sup>249</sup> Knowing how easy it is for race to become an idolatrous, totalizing issue, Anderson proposes a theology that includes race, but that also seeks to keep race, as a symbol, in check. BAP also looks to keep race in check, to the extent that, while it is tailored toward African Americans, it is not so dependent on race as to exclude others or render the paradigm itself unusable for anyone other than African Americans to participate.

Similar to Anderson, BAP recognizes that interdependence, creative dialogue, and openness are made possible through the coming together of factors including experience, ambiguity, creative conflict and exchange, race, community and communications between

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247. Ibid.

248. Ibid. Note here that Beloved Community, for Anderson, is a positive aspirational goal.

249. Ibid., 6.

theists, non-theists and atheists. Also like Anderson, BAP recognizes that race, though experienced as a priori, is still a historical and sociological construct affecting social meaning and identifying, defining, and influencing communal interactions in the West.<sup>250</sup> Pinn's AANHT still views African American experience and identity primarily as racial struggle, resistance and survival. BAP, however, does not. BAP views conversations regarding theism, non-theism, atheism, and even race as more than just fodder in the struggle for liberation. Also similar to Anderson, BAP views race as a dynamic and ambiguous reflector of the wide range of positive and negative racial expression within the African American community that is simultaneously vulnerable to manipulation; to historical, sociological and cultural changes; and to corruptibility.<sup>251</sup> Most importantly, however, BAP endeavors that the interactive communication of one's non-idolatrous, narrative interpretations of theism, non-theism, and atheism will facilitate an understanding of the religious and non-religious experiences of one's self and others beyond one's own specific faith communities, traditions, and previous actions.<sup>252</sup>

## **FUTURE POSSIBILITIES OF BLACK APOPHATIC PHENOMENOLOGY**

I have proposed Black Apophatic Phenomenology as my preferred paradigm for overcoming the onto-theology, ontology, and idolatry inherent in classical Christianity and in Pinn's AANHT. However, BAP has the possibility to accomplish much more. BAP is, at its heart, a facilitator of the ability to question. As a phenomenological philosophical paradigm, BAP has the flexibility of employing various philosophies to query theistic and nontheistic theologies in an open, apophatic, and nondogmatic manner. For example, BAP utilizes both

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250. Anderson, *Creative Exchange*, 4.

251. Ibid.

252. Ibid.

western—apophatic phenomenology—and eastern—double negation—methodologies to query theism, atheism, and non-theism. As a result, rather than having philosophy interpret theology, apophatics provides a means by which dogma, creedal, and traditional boundaries can be stretched, reshaped, and reimagined through interrogation. At its best, BAP fosters both sincere knowledge building and exploratory play regarding one’s own theistic, non-theistic, or atheistic background, as well as the theistic, non-theistic, and atheistic backgrounds of others. I use the terminology of exploratory play as a means of expanding our understanding of the mindsets that can be brought to the process of interrogation. Exploratory play does not denote the seriousness of the subject matter, rather it describes a mindset that is as open, curious, and flexible as a child at play.

BAP uses apophasis to encourage diversity and facilitate conversation and interrogation amongst theists, non-theists, and atheists. By placing diversity, conversation and interrogation at the center of BAP, BAP displaces the centrality of any one mode of liberation within its context. BAP contributes to the process of liberative action by further reflecting the multitudinous contributions to complex subjectivity and meaning making as it pertains to the diversity of African Americans in all of their personal humanity and dignity, and as these humans participate in the non-monolithic African American community. With BAP facilitating inclusivity, dialogue and diversity, the narrative regarding liberation can be expanded so that the complexities of liberation and liberative actions can be interrogated, analyzed, and contemplated.

As a result, BAP expands the considerations of African American subjectivity even past the point of Pinn’s primary sources of liberative thought—in other words, past Pinn’s nitty-gritty hermeneutics. BAP’s recognition of the expansiveness of African American complex subjectivity does not merely recognize the existence of rampant racism, or the comforts provided to some by

the Christian faith, or the hard times of life documented by the blues and hip hop. Similar to Anderson, BAP will draw upon the multitudinous experiences of African Americans as the unifying factor of complex meaning making and as the paradigm within which liberative activities take place. Key to BAP's ability to draw upon all aspects of African American experience is the fact that BAP is, unwaveringly, a phenomenology, rather than a theology. As such, it will utilize not only established religious and spiritual rituals, but also established cultural and societal rituals. However, most importantly, BAP will focus on three key aspects in the living out of our already established rituals. BAP will specifically draw attention to the presence or absence of representational diversity within and surrounding these rituals. BAP will be especially sensitive to, and diligent towards engaging, apophatic conversations that recognize diversity and bring knowledge of differing understandings and points of view to the forefront of the discussions. Finally, BAP will facilitate the mutual human enhancement of those involved in the rituals by stimulating apophatic reflection as to how their own kataphatic understandings have been affected by their participation in the rituals.

Take, for example, the African American cultural ritual that is the family reunion. Family reunions bring together African Americans that are often from diverse backgrounds, sociological environments, cultural contexts and many other characteristics, all brought together under the unifier of family. Family reunions can call into question one's understanding of, and orientation towards, gender, marital/couple relationships, sexual orientation, and a host of other determinations about African Americans, and about humanity in general. Applying BAP to the ritual of family reunions involves how BAP can transcend the boundaries of theism, nontheism and atheism by asking the question, "What is a family?" BAP would call for dogmatic, traditional kataphatic claims regarding family to be called into question by looking at the

different instantiations of family participating in the family reunion ritual. This BAP initiated querying would, of course, take into consideration the ongoing devastating impact of slavery on the realities of contemporary African American life. However, BAP would facilitate an understanding of the ever-changing contemporary landscape; a landscape where different sexual orientations are embraced, where gender essentialism is problematized with questions of transgenderism, multigenderism, and nonbinary gender fluidity, and where there is a recognition of not only how our understanding of individuality will be challenged, but how those challenges will affect our understanding of the virtues of family. BAP would facilitate communication, encourage inclusivity, and further interrogate our current levels of familial participation, openness to inclusivity, and understanding of diversity to inquire as to whether we are, as of yet, diverse enough.

The apophasis of BAP does not require that people give up their kataphatic understandings of family. However, BAP would encourage an interrogation of those understandings to recognize that there can be broader definitions of family that can still facilitate the development of the moral characteristics of its family members. These moral characteristics can involve traditional African and African American familial moral characteristics including truthfulness, integrity, hospitality, covenantal faithfulness, honor and respect for the elderly and ancestors, and a communal ethos of kindness, generosity and unselfishness.<sup>253</sup> At the same time, the interrogation of our beliefs regarding family can also broaden our understanding of the dignity of the diverse human beings that constitute our African American families. Interrogations of our preconceptions, which BAP facilitates, should lead us away from trying to dictate the

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253. Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 88-90.

lifestyles of others and towards how we can best embrace the moral characteristics of family while allowing each person to bring their full personhood to contribute to the family unit.

BAP can also influence how funerals, as ritual, are approached. While some funerals in the African American community are held in churches and are focused on the question as to whether or not we will see our family members again in eternity, BAP would ask the question, “What is a life well lived?” In other words, rather than just accepting the traditional activity of gathering at a place of worship to celebrate someone’s “homegoing to be with the Lord,” BAP can facilitate going to a place where that person lived life—a bar, a sporting event, the home of the deceased person’s loved ones, a charitable cause at which the deceased spent time participating—and living moments like those once lived by the deceased. The apophysis of BAP can problematize and interrogate the idea that the value of one’s life is determined by the destination of one’s soul for eternity. It can also question the idea that we will somehow be gathered together once again with our ancestors upon our death. Can we not, in a sense, “be with” our ancestors as we live our lives, as we love our families, as we enjoy ourselves and as we help others? Can bringing freedom and liberty in this present life to ourselves and others commemorate our loved ones in death as much or more than just being comforted that we will see them again in the afterlife? Questions such as these and the resulting conversations and changes in how we look at and conduct rituals is what I propose that BAP will facilitate.

With BAP’s emphasis on the diversity of African American experiences, BAP establishes as primary ritual the continual interrogation of existing rituals. As a result, it seeks art, media, and other sociological and cultural structures that consistently challenge the stereotypes of African Americans and African American experiences. One such example would be movies like

*Moonlight*. *Moonlight* is the movie made from Tarell Alvey McCraney's semi-autobiographical play entitled *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*. The movie follows the journey from boyhood to manhood of the film's African American protagonist, Chiron, as he deals with his sexual identity in the midst of very difficult circumstances.<sup>254</sup> The movie is of interest as it pertains to BAP from the standpoint of the questions it generates regarding our preconceived notions of family, of role models, of sexuality, and other important aspects of African American family and communal experience.

For example, one of the characters in the film named Juan serves as a father figure for Chiron in Chiron's early childhood, and lets Chiron know that he should not be ashamed of his sexuality. However, Juan is simultaneously a drug dealer who inadvertently provides drugs to Chiron's mother, thus eroding her ability to adequately take care of Chiron.<sup>255</sup> Can a drug dealer be a father figure and a role model? Kataphatically, it would perhaps be easiest and most comfortable to categorically deny the ability for a drug dealer to be both a father figure and a role model. BAP, however, makes no claim to providing neat, comfortable answers; BAP cannot be neat and comfortable because life itself is neither neat nor comfortable the majority of the time. Apophasis, however, is often the best means of approaching seemingly disparate subject matter. As a result, BAP can facilitate discussion surrounding father figures, role models, drug dealers, and obstacles to functional family life. As another example, the movie explores Chiron's childhood struggle with his sexuality. What is sexual orientation? To what extent is sexual orientation within our control? Is it a childhood struggle, or does it most accurately reveal itself

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254. Hilton Als, "Moonlight Undoes Our Expectations," *New Yorker*, October 24, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181026040742/https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/24/moonlight-undoes-our-expectations>

255. Ibid.

at the point of puberty and sexual experimentation? Does one experience fit all? These are the types of interrogations that BAP facilitates.

As another example, BAP looks hermeneutically to artists such as Chance the Rapper, Childish Gambino, and Kendrick Lamar, and not just for the fact that they prove that all rap does not have to sound like or look like the counter-cultural stereotypes perpetuated in the industry. BAP looks to artists such as these because they upend stereotypes about black people, their upbringing and education, and their mental, emotional, and spiritual outlooks regarding the world. Case in point: the nerdy, angst ridden Childish Gambino—alter-ego of the college educated and artistically brilliant Donald Glover—powerfully addresses social issues in his songs and videos through an extremely complex layering of critique against American society, domestic violence, gun culture, and the entertainment industry.<sup>256</sup> As another example, Chance the Rapper grew up in a middle class setting with a father who at one time worked for then Senator Barak Obama in Chicago.<sup>257</sup> Chance is a social activist whose rap lyrics are generally happy and appreciative to God for his success. Are Childish Gambino and Chance the Rapper the kind of black rappers that people expect? Childish Gambino encourages us to take the blinders of entertainment off and see what is really happening in this country. On the other hand, Chance's lyrics do not portray hopeless conditions; yet, it is his faith in God that spurs him on to the concrete actions he takes to advocate for and contribute to public school education for children in Chicago. BAP challenges you to rethink rap stereotypes, rap artists, and the message of rap songs. On the other hand, Kendrick Lamar resembles physically the stereotypical African

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256. "Donald Glover Biography," Biography.com, A & E Television Networks, last modified September 17, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181026051642/https://www.biography.com/people/donald-glover-112517>.

257. "Chance The Rapper Biography," Biography.com website, A & E Television Networks, last modified July 20, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181026053113/https://www.biography.com/people/chance-the-rapper-5152017>.



American rap artist with his dark complexion and his dreadlocks; yet Kendrick's lyrics ask hard questions of himself as a man, and of God. Kendrick's latest, Pulitzer prize winning album DAMN, is filled with questions towards God about why he has to suffer in this world, while he simultaneously laments his own fears, insecurities, depression and shortcomings as a black man in America, all summarized within single word song titles such as Love, Humble, Fear, and Yah.<sup>258</sup> The Pulitzer board called the album "a virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African-American life."<sup>259</sup> Such a description, regarding capturing the complexity of modern African-American life, exemplifies BAP. BAP allows for the mediation and interpretation of the meaning of black rap to extend beyond the stereotypical models of rap industry into the more self-reflective, vulnerable, deeply emotive and intelligent complexities of what it means to be black in today's society. Furthermore, BAP does not resolve itself simply to traditional notions of anything; instead, it continues to ask questions, foster conversations, seek diversity, and encourage inclusivity for the plethora of African Americans and African American experiences.

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258. Rodney Carmichael, "The Prophetic Struggle of Kendrick Lamar's 'Damn.'" NPR.org, December 12, 2017 <https://web.archive.org/web/20181026062158/https://www.npr.org/2017/12/12/568748405/the-prophetic-struggle-of-kendrick-lamars-damn>

259. Pulitzer Prize Board, "The 2018 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Music, DAMN., by Kendrick Lamar," <https://web.archive.org/web/20181026060326/https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/kendrick-lamar>.

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